Today's talk is about intention. Please sit comfortably.

When we begin on the road of spiritual work, we're trying to deal with the usual problems of greed, hatred and ignorance. One of the things we discover is that meditation works and things do soften and become more spacious for us. We also discover that after a certain time all the ways in which we're actually meditating are out of greed, hatred and ignorance as well. We're meditating because we want something in some sort of materialistic way, or because we are frightened of something and we're trying to get away from it, to find a place far from it, or, we're just sitting there dully having our lives drift along like a log pretending to be a crocodile. Then, in some way, we have to take action. The problem is that any action we take tends to be mediated by greed, hatred and ignorance as well. The old masters gave a lot of thought to this problem. One of their solutions revolved around just how to hold intention. I think it's good to have an intention; it's good to want to open the heart, open the eyes, open the mind. It really does change things. Getting enlightened gives us quite different problems and it changes the whole aspect of how we relate with other people. So it's good to go further and further into that vast meadow.

One of the things we find, though, is that our initial intention is always blocked. I've told this story before, but it seems important to me. When I first came to Aitken Roshi, I had sat for some time so I wasn't really a beginner in that way although I felt like a beginner. I would come to dokusan with him and either just look at him or I'd say, "I don't know." Either way he'd ring his bell. Someone in this sesshin said, "It's like being on an elevator. You go up, you go down, come up, go down." So I was on that elevator--I'd go in and I'd come out, I'd go in and I'd come out. One dokusan was about 45 seconds. I thought, "Well, this doesn't seem to be doing it, does it?" I thought of all the different possible ways, and the more I tried, the more my trying reared up in front of me like a cliff. If I didn't try, that was aversion. I couldn't bear not being enlightened; I couldn't bear suffering. Either way my trying reared up in front of me. When I didn't try, then I was just a log pretending to be a crocodile. Nothing was happening and it was just dullness. Who knows?

At some stage or another it dawned on me that this was the great life, going along saying, "I don't know; I really don't know. I'm not faking it; I just don't know." He'd just ring his bell and I'd bow and leave. I'd come back next dokusan and say, "I don't know," and he'd ring his bell. At some moment I realized that this was the perfect life in its own fashion just as all lives are perfect. Maybe that was the first little glimpse of buddha nature which blesses each thing we do no matter how apparently shabby or futile.

How I worked with the problem of intention--I realized later that this was a very old thing--was that I decided I would just meditate and I would just have to do this for the rest of my
life. I would have to come in and say, "I don't know," and bow. I thought this seemed rather complete in its own way, but it seemed like there might be some other things I could do with my life as well. I realized I could clean the zendo floor; I could build the zendo, in fact, I took a wall out of the zendo and put in windows so that people could have air in summer, things like that. Service comes up to us. We can serve the dharma. It doesn't matter where we are on the path—if we've just entered, if we're a little way along, if we're somewhere in the middle, if we're three-quarters, if we're far along. That is the same for all of us. We have to hold intention as something that is not just for us, but for the world itself—for the ants and the cicadas and the small birds singing so faithfully in the trees at dawn. We are told at first that they are our original face, but at first we do not understand that except as fine poetry. So we just have to trust it and go along. That softens our intention so it is no longer a wall. We're not just trying something for a narrow purpose. We become more compassionate and sweet with the small things that arise in meditation.

One thing that you can guarantee about the meditation path is that what can go wrong, will go wrong, and we just have to bless that. In my case, I had come from far at great struggle and given up my whole life to come into dokusan, bow and say, "I don't know," and he'd shake his head. I read an old Rinzai saying, "Do you think that you are afraid of hell? Hell is to sit here in this zendo and not realize the Great Matter, not know your own true nature" I used to feel that at the end of sesshin. I used to feel so unhappy, but I realized in a way that was just more of greed, hatred and ignorance, too. That's really not true, I think. Hell is not to be on the path. If you're on the path, it doesn't matter if you've got the merest toehold. Some light is entering your heart and that is a great thing and a matter for gratitude, endless gratitude. It's not that once you're on the path, you don't have an intention, you do. But you realize that what you set out for was much narrower than what you will arrive at. The width and depth that opens before us is a commitment to all beings, to the planet itself, to the smallest creature.

That means that everything that rises up we must bless. It doesn't really matter what it is. If you're meditating along, you've done really good work, you've meditated really hard, it's the middle of sesshin, naturally your meditation will go all to hell. If you're willing to bless that and have compassion with that, too, you don't then raise up that wall of narrow greed and materialistic intention. You create a space for that, too. You include that, too, and you find that, too, is the face of the koan, that, too, is your own original face. Suddenly you find, ah, it's completely serene and ease waves. Or, you're in a relationship and you always think, why didn't he or she reveal this aspect before we got married or before we got this far into it. That is the gift. That is the gift of love. It's exactly through that place that wisdom will open. In a community it is the same. Why is everybody so crazy in zen? That is the gift. That we must love each other through the struggles.

The alchemists thought of this as the primal material, the prima materia, of life. They always said it was something very inferior that we disregarded. Somebody asked Lao Tse, "Where is the Great Matter?" He said, "It's in the dirt." He said, "Such a thing as that?" Lao Tse said, "It's in the ants." He said, "So small a thing as that, teacher?" "It's in the piss and the
shit," Lao Tse said. The alchemists said that, too. They said, what you have to start work with are things like rat's feces or dead mice or coagulated blood, a whore's urine. Something very inferior that people would normally despise. That is the very stuff of life. So it is that thing that you push aside in order to get to the goal that is the goal itself, that is the gate to what you seek. It is only when we make our intention generous enough, then we can include that, too, and then we can find the gate.

Lin chi was a very serious student and here's his enlightenment story. This is Case 86 of the Book of Serenity. The Book of Serenity has an interesting history because it's a collection of a hundred koan stories and then it was fancied up by a teacher in northern China called Wansong. The original text was lost because of the usual civil wars that were happening at the time, invasions, and so on. It was written a second time at the request of a disciple called Yelu Chucai, who was a polymath. He was one of the spiritually advanced people who tried to work with the chaos in China at that time. In fact, at the time he received the Book of Serenity from his teacher he was out on the steppes with Ghengis Khan, he'd been impressed into service by Ghengis Khan to be a minister and was one of a number of people who were trying to help the khans realize that it wasn't a good idea to burn the cities in China. It is said that when the book arrived, they stayed up all night reading it aloud to each other. There are many ways to do the dharma. It is always that our circumstance is real and deep and difficult. Lin chi's story:

Lin chi asked Huangpo, "What is the true essential meaning of the Buddha's teaching?" Huangpo immediately hit him. (Huangpo was seven feet tall so that was quite an impressive event.)

This happened three times that Lin chi came to Huangpo and three times Huangpo hit him.

There's a story before this. It starts out: Lin chi came to Huangpo and for three years he just sat in the assembly and he never even asked for an interview. He just sat and followed along. He did everything with a very soft, fluid mind. He didn't resist or push himself forward or hold back. He just followed the circumstances and he was considered to be unusual.

Wansong says:

It seems to me that Huangpo could hardly have allowed people not to ask about things, yet Lin chi was there for three years, and he was allowed not to ask about things. This was because his capacity was so unusual and he was different.

After three years the head of the temple, Muzhou, said, "Why don't you go and ask something of the teacher?"

Lin chi said, "I don't know what to ask." (I don't know.)

The head of the temple said, "Why don't you ask him what is the true essential great meaning of Buddha's teaching?"

So he said, "Okay, I'll do it." He went along and said, "What's the true essential great meaning of Buddha's teaching?", and Huangpo hit him. He went back again and asked the same question, and he didn't understand. So Huangpo hit him again, and a third time and he hit him again.
Lin chi went to the head monk and said, "I do not understand Huangpo's teaching. My karma, perhaps, does not belong to this place. I think I probably should leave and go and study at another temple."

Muzhou said, "That's okay, but go and see the teacher before you leave." Muzhou went and told Huangpo, "This person has some ability and he's planning to leave. I just thought I'd let you know."

Lin chi comes into Huangpo who says, "Why don't you go to Dayu?", who was a teacher down the road.

Lin chi says, "All right. If you tell me, I'll do it." He'll do anything for the dharma, and he goes to Dayu.

Dayu says, "Where have you come from?"
He says, "from Huangpo."

Dayu says, "What did Huangpo say?"
Lin chi says, "Three times I asked about the truly essential great meaning of the buddhist teaching, and three times he hit me with a stick. I don't know if I was at fault or not."

I think this attitude is very beautiful because he doesn't really know if he's right, or the teacher's right. He doesn't know and he has an open mind. He's agnostic about life. He hasn't come to quick opinions about things. His mind is still open. So you can see already that fluid, resilient quality in him.

Dayu said, "Huangpo was as kind as a grandmother. He did his utmost for you, and still you come and ask me if there is any fault or not?"

Lin chi was greatly enlightened at these words. Immediately after that he said, "Oh, there's nothing much to Huangpo's Buddhism after all."

Dayu said, "You bedwetting devil! You just asked if you had any error or not, and now you say there's not much to Huangpo's Buddhism? How much is this?", and he grabbed him and said, "Speak! Speak!"

Lin chi hit him three times.

Dayu let him go and said, "I think your teacher must be Huangpo. It's got nothing to do with me." He sent him back.

Lin chi came back to Huangpo, and Huangpo said, "Coming and going over and over. When will it ever end?"

Lin chi said, "It's just because you are so kind." Then he told the story of what happened.
Huangpo said, "Dayu's too talkative. Wait til I see him. I'll hit him myself."

Lin chi said, "Why talk about waiting to see him? How about right now?", and he hit his teacher.
Huangpo laughed, "This lunatic comes in to grab the tiger's whiskers."

Lin chi shouted, "Ha!"

Huangpo said, "Attendant take this madman into the meditation hall."

That's Lin chi's story.

Muzhou is the person who told him, "Go in to see the teacher."

There's often a Muzhou in our lives, somebody who just turns us in the right direction and helps our intention in that way when we are wavering, when we have lost it. Yunmen, as great a teacher as Lin chi, came to Muzhou when he was young. Three times he went to Muzhou and couldn't get in. Muzhou would listen for the footsteps and he didn't think they were present enough so he wouldn't open the gate. Then he did and let him in and grabbed him and said, "Speak! Speak!" Yunmen was shocked and could say nothing. Muzhou threw him out and slammed the iron gate and broke his leg. That's the moment Yunmen had his great enlightenment, when he broke his leg.

Muzhou used to make sandals for people, secretly. While he was sulking in his room, he'd make sandals secretly for people, and put them out by the roadside so that when they wore out their sandals, they'd have new shoes to go onto the next temple when they were on pilgrimage. A kind of secret bodhisattva. He was still doing this. He must have been almost 100 years old when he broke Yunmen's leg. Lin chi was dead by then.

The intention is an important thing. You must gather it and when you've gathered it, then we have to make it not that cliff in front of us of greed and clinging and loathing and fear. In some traditions, particularly some Native American traditions and some shamanic Japanese traditions, too, you go out, say, to a cliff and you shout your intention across the valley. Enlightenment! Whatever it is you want. But you better want something good. Be careful in that way. There is some way in which it's good to know what you want, to be willing to just sit and serve until you get it. If you make your intention generous enough and broad enough, it will come to you. You just have to be faithful walking the path.

Now is the time, then, to wrestle with that. It's a time, actually, to be both gentle and fierce, as all times are. Don't just settle into being a log and passing the time just because you have a lot of samadhi power. See if you can gather everything you have and enter the way. If you just keep gathering and keep putting one foot after the other and love everything that arises, then the sun will rise in your own hands; the sun will rise in your own heart. You and the sun and the birds and the trees will have the same face.

Please keep going.

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Borrowed from Middle French intention, entention, from Old French entencion, from Latin intentio, intentionem. Compare intent.

 IPA(key): /ɪnˈtɛnʃən/. Hyphenation: in‧ten‧tion. Rhymes: -ɛnʃən. Homophone: intention. intention (countable and uncountable, plural intentions). The goal or purpose behind a specific action or set of actions. The intention of this legislation is to boost the economy. My intention was to marry a wealthy widow. Intention definition: An intention is an idea or plan of what you are going to do. | Meaning, pronunciation, translations and examples. Beveridge announced his intention of standing for parliament. [+ of]. It is my intention to remain in my position until a successor is elected. Unfortunately, his good intentions never seemed to last long. Synonyms: aim, plan, idea, goal More Synonyms of intention. 2. See have no intention/have every intention. COBUILD Advanced English Dictionary. Copyright © HarperCollins Publishers. intention - WordReference English dictionary, questions, discussion and forums. All Free.Â an act or instance of deciding upon an action; plan;[uncountable]His intention was to spend a month in Spain. intentions, [plural]. general purposes; attitude toward the effect of one's actions:He's constantly making mistakes, but at least he has good intentions. purpose or attitude with respect to marrying someone:Are his intentions serious? WordReference Random House Unabridged Dictionary of American English © 2021. Intention is a mental state that represents a commitment to carrying out an action or actions in the future. Intention involves mental activities such as planning and forethought. Folk psychology explains human behavior on the basis of mental states, including beliefs, desires, and intentions. Mental mechanisms, including intention, explain behavior in that individuals are seen as actors who have desires and who attempt to achieve goals that are directed by beliefs. intention definition: 1. something that you want and plan to do: 2. something that you want and plan to do: 3â€¦. Learn more.Â intention. The intentions of policy thus need to be seen against the plans rather than the outcomes. From the Cambridge English Corpus. However, intentions and plans imply the sensation of conscious will. From the Cambridge English Corpus. More examples Fewer examples. They reported being interested in what was being offered without having any pre-existing intention to take up these offers.