The Nature of Deeper Intention

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This essay is an edited version of a conversation between Peter Senge and Charles Holmes, facilitator, Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education.

If you ask people to state an intention, they will usually describe a particular goal. But there is a trap here, I believe. It is possible to have a very strong vision, yet not be clear about your deeper intention or what it means to align with that. Then you can get very attached to that vision with your mind locked in on a particular objective. There is nothing wrong with this; it's a natural state of affairs, but it can prevent you from seeing what is actually emerging around you.

You can get attached to a goal. If you suddenly start to think, 'this might not happen,' fear arises and, with it, a tendency to manipulate things to get what you want. This manipulation is an automatic by-product of attachment.

In contrast, you cannot get attached to a pure intention because you cannot be attached to who you are. You can only become attached to an ideal of who you are, such as the way you think you should look. It is pretty easy to get attached to those kinds of ideals. But who I am is who I could *not* not be. How do you become attached to something that you could *not* not be? If your deeper intention is an inseparable part of who you are, it is not capable of attachment.

You cannot seek to accomplish your intention. You live out of your intention. It is like the wind, the life force from which your energy and determination arises, whereas your vision is a particular destination you want to reach.

So, as best I can understand, the heart of the dynamic of being truly committed and nonattached is to anchor in your deeper intention and focus your energies on realizing your vision, while at the same time knowing that the vision is, at best, a reflection of your deeper intention.

It is possible to be truly committed and not attached. Indeed, it is essential to developing our mastery in the creative process. For years we have expressed this basic idea as the principle, "It's not what the vision is, it's what the vision does." In other words, rather than obsess about realizing my vision, consider it as a force for change, a way of aligning my actions with nature's unfolding. When you operate this way, what happens may not be exactly as you imagined it in your vision, but what happens would otherwise not have happened. You could hold a vision of genuine perfection in some domain and, although you might never realize that vision, you might also achieve things that would have never been achieved otherwise. It's not what the vision is, it's what the vision does.

In this spirit, pursuing a vision is a way to live in harmony with your deeper ineffable intention. In this sense, vision is a tool for orienting our energies and effort around who we really are. But when we obsess about whether or not our vision is being achieved, we confuse the animating force behind our being with an idea created by our mind.

Confusing vision with deeper intention is in line with the common view of many spiritual disciplines, including Buddhism, that we live mostly in a confused and deluded state. We confuse our body with our Self. We confuse our self-identity or self-ideal with who we really are. We confuse the content of our thought or awareness with the capacity to have awareness. Robert Frost characterized enlightenment as 'a momentary stay of confusion.' Naturally, in this confused state, attachment is a big problem.

But knowing that a deeper intention animates your life and that out of that you create images of the future you truly seek will help you move through this confusion. You can be committed and non-attached—fully engaged in realizing your vision, yet at peace with whatever happens. It is a paradoxical state, but one that arises from a deep inner alignment, devoting your life to cultivating yourself, and appreciating life as a learning journey toward becoming a true human being. Without this commitment to cultivating oneself, the inner force (or qi as they say in Taoism) and the spiritual energy are weak.

With no inner alignment, there is no difference between commitment and attachment and consequently inner struggles and suffering then inevitably intermingle with our aims to improve the world. This is the lesson I take from being around genuine teachers like His Holiness the Dalai Lama who are both profoundly committed and radiate a lightness of being that touches so many of us.

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