

**TRAIN YOUR BRAIN #14**  
**THE POWER OF INTENTION**  
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### **Introduction**

Leaving behind the focus on difficult emotions focus in the last four classes, let's consider aspects of action, where we might be more effective and skillful.

This article is an introduction to the concept of intention, where the concept arose from in spiritual practice, some of the ways it is used in current psychological practice, and some of what is known about the neuroanatomy of carrying out intentions and actions.

### **Wise Intention**

Most religious traditions note the strength and quality of intention, the force behind volitional acts that can direct them for good or for evil. In the Buddhist tradition Wise Intention is the second step on the Eightfold Path to the relief of suffering, following Right View. Intention precedes action, and is itself preceded by emotions and motivations. Actions stimulated by the three poisons - greed, hatred, and delusion - can only lead to bad outcomes for ourselves or others. Keeping awareness of the causes of our actions will significantly decrease our suffering and improve the outcomes of our actions. As is said in the first verses of the Dhammapada, the collected sayings of the Buddha,

Mind is the forerunner of all things.  
If one speaks or acts with an impure mind,  
Suffering follows, like the wheel that follows the foot of the ox.

Mind is the forerunner of all things.  
If one speaks or acts with a pure mind,  
Happiness follows, like the shadow that never leaves.

In spiritual practice, paying attention to intention requires a great degree of quiet awareness, becoming aware of the "just about to happen" feeling that signals that you are going to behave this way or that. The goal is to be able to choose, to have the balance, clarity, and discriminating wisdom to select the intention and the action that best serves ourselves and all other beings. This is particularly difficult in a fast paced world, with multitasking behaviors, and constant sensory

bombardment. Just think of paying attention to your speech, saying only what was true, useful, non-harmful, and timely.

### **Psychological Perspectives on Intention**

Intentions can also be powerful, even in the unconscious states of sleep. It is possible to set the intention to not snore and be successful for a time. It may not be perfect, but it can be a step in the right direction.

In the daily attempt to curb your appetite and lose weight, or in the more serious issues of healing from depression and loss, the use of intentions to change behavior has a long history in psychology. William James, one of the founders of modern psychology, struggled against depression and suicidality for much of his career. He would write of needing a “reason for wishing to live four hours longer”, and finally concluded that his capacity to will was what kept him engaged and productive. James differentiated wish, when we desire that which is not achievable, from will, when we desire that which we can attain. He also differentiated primary will, like the motor actions in changing a shirt which usually do not involve conflict, healthy will, in which action follows vision in a clear sequence, and obstructed will, in which the vision of action is blocked by fatigue and exhaustion. He felt that the central core of will was attention/intention, and that the fatigue that ensues from the exercise of will was the fatigue of sustained attention in the face of stories brought up by the mind. His example of that was the difficulty getting out of bed on a cold New England morning, which often could only be accomplished by stopping the internal arguments as to why that wouldn't be a good idea.

“We suddenly find that we have got up. A fortunate lapse of consciousness occurs; we forget both the warmth and the cold; we fall into some reverie connected with the day's life, in the course of which the idea flashes across us, ‘Hollo! I must lie here no longer’—an idea which at that lucky instant awakens no contradictory or paralyzing suggestions, and consequently produces immediately its appropriate motor effects.”

Rollo May, in his book Love and Will, discusses the theme of intentionality. This is different from intentions, but underlies them. Intentionality is the capacity to have intentions, to assign meaning to experience, and May feels that it is at the heart of consciousness. It is the ability to simulate and plan our oncoming experiences and actions, to see objects in relationship to our goals. May states that the concept of intentionality began as epistemology, a way of knowing reality.

Aristotle stated that “what is given to the eyes is the intention of the soul”. Middle Age scholars in the Western and Arabic traditions spoke of two kinds of intentionality: *intensio primo*, knowing particular things, and *intensio secundo*, the relationship of objects to general concepts (conceptualization). St Thomas Aquinas felt that intentionality is what the intellect grasps about the object/concept it thinks it understands. When we are informed about something, our intellect forms us by creating an internal model of that something.

Kant attests that the mind is not passive written-on clay, but rather conforms objects to the ways that it understands them. In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Franz Brentano taught that consciousness intends the object, and gives meaningful content to consciousness itself. Brentano taught both Freud and Husserl and Husserl, who was the first phenomenologist, noted that consciousness never exists in a vacuum but is always directed toward something. It cannot be dissected from the outside world, but it rather constitutes that world. Husserl stated that “meaning is an intention of the mind”. Finally, in May’s summary of the intellectual history of intentionality, he notes that Heidegger, by adding the concept of caring (*Sorge*) to Husserl’s understanding, extended intentionality into the total feeling, acting, and valuing human being. “Man is the being who cares about Being”.

Intention is derived from the Latin root tendere, related to *tensum*, and therefore to tension and to “stretching toward”, hence tendencies. It is also clearly related to *tend*, to *tender*, and therefore to taking care of and nurturing. These relationships are not linguistic accidents, but point to a deeper species awareness of what intention involves. That which we care about, we foster and repeat.

May concludes his argument “...that every meaning has within it a commitment. And this does not refer to the use of my muscles after I get an idea in order to accomplish the idea. ...our analysis leads to...the...conclusion, that a sheer movement of the muscles, as the larynx in talking, is...a human being intending something. And you cannot understand the overt behavior except as you see it in relation to, and as an expression of, its intention. Meaning has no meaning apart from intention. Each act of consciousness tends toward something, is a turning of the person toward something, and has within it, no matter how latent, some push toward direction for action. Cognition, or knowing, and conation, or willing, then go together.”

Spiritual, philosophical, and psychological traditions seem to therefore converge on the idea that what we intend is what we know and create simultaneously. From this perspective, we can see how our intentions can create both joy and

havoc. There is also the window of Hope, the last spirit inside Pandora's box, that we can gain control of our intentions and move our world into a more loving and beautiful space.

So how to operationalize this in real world time. On a less lofty, but powerful and popular frame, Stephen Covey outlines a program in his The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. He starts by defining our character as a "composite of our habits". (Sounds like Chogyam Trungpa's comment about what is reincarnated—"I'm sorry to say that it is likely your bad habits"). Habit, for Covey, is the intersection of knowledge, skill, and desire. Changing or creating a habit requires work on all three of these arenas. As we move through life, from dependence as an infant to independence as an adolescent to interdependence as a mature adult, we become more skillful, effective, and fully human. His skillful habits, in sequence, are:

#### **From Dependence to Independence**

- 1) Be Proactive—be responsible for your own actions and decisions, don't be reactive, make love a verb, make and keep commitments.
- 2) Begin with the End in Mind—Start with a clear understanding of your destination, what will be said of you at the end of your life, know what is deeply important to you, and know that all things are first created in the mind, then created in the environment. Develop a personal mission statement, including your center and the factors of security, wisdom, guidance, and power. Center your life on correct principles (Right View).
- 3) Put First Things First—develop a moment by moment discipline, doing the things that need doing now to attain the goal, doing the important and the urgent before the unimportant and non-urgent.

#### **From Independence to Interdependence**

- 4) Think Win/Win—seek mutual benefit in all interactions (human and non-human). Default is Win/Win or No Deal. Foster integrity, maturity (balance courage and conviction), sense of abundance in your character. From character, move to win/win relationships and then to win/win agreements. In agreements, specify desired results, guidelines for performance, resources available, accountability, and consequences.
- 5) Seek First to Understand...Then to be Understood—communicate with empathic listening, intending to understand. Diagnose before you prescribe. Understand the differences in the other's perceptions.

6) Synergize—create new alternatives using all of the participants, the relationship between the parts is a part of the whole itself. Be open to the creative risk of newness. Seek a transformative third alternative – Renewal.

7) Sharpen the Saw—Four aspects of one’s nature need balancing. Rebalance the physical with exercise, nutrition, and stress management. Rebalance the social/emotional with service, empathy, synergy, intrinsic security. Rebalance the spiritual with value clarification and commitment, study, and meditation. Rebalance the mental with reading, visualizing, planning, and writing.

### Exercises

The following exercises will help you to pursue your best life goals, even if they are difficult, by setting up intermediate rewards and renewals of purpose. These are some of a large number of similar exercises that are available in the literature. We like these because they take you from contemplation of just “what is and what needs to be”, through verbalization (a way of making things real), and finally into a sense of embodied action.

#### First exercise—Contemplation and Formulation

15 min/20 with sharing guidelines for instruction - First, get a writing pad for later in the exercise

Take up your seat, bring yourself into your body,  
Assume a relaxed but alert posture,  
Bring yourself to the breath,  
Once centered and seated and breathing,  
Let the sense of personal energy expand  
Let the sense of groundedness in this body and time expand.

Let yourself become aware that this body/mind/heart will someday pass away, will become nothing, will end. Sometime in the future, at a moment unknown to any of us now.

Let this be a distant time in your awareness, to allow space for thought and action and to minimize fear and reactivity.

Looking back from that future moment to your life, feel what your life has been about, what values you have lived out, what successes you have had.

Looking back from that future moment, let yourself gently feel what you could have done better, what skills you could have gained,

what values you could have lived. Be very gentle with this, using as much forgiveness for yourself as you need, as much equanimity and understanding of causes and conditions as necessary to maintain balance and compassion for yourself.

From that future place, feel what is important to your life, what you would say to the present “you” about the main purpose of your life. What were you meant to do in this existence? What would you say then to the you now that needs to be changed to better fulfill your life’s purpose?

Retain, as best you can, that sense of equanimity and compassion for yourself.

Now, pick up the writing pad, and note your life’s main purpose on the top line of the pad. Draw a line down the middle of the pad. On the left hand side, write down several core values (up to 10), that reflect the qualities of a life lived according to that main purpose.

On the right hand side, write down, as concretely as possible (within the limited space), how you will make these values come alive over the next 30 to 40 years. How are you going to lift yourself by your own bootstraps? What Trim Tabs are you going to use to mark your life for its best purpose? Can you form these values into intentions for behavior that you can feel are possible, realistic, yet challenging?

**Second Exercise - Sharing the Intentions, Starting to Make Them Real**  
Arrange yourself in pairs (at home you can do this in the mirror).

Introduce yourselves to each other, wish each other well in this life and effort.

Select which one of you will go first, who will actively listen. The selected first person will share their main purpose for this life, then choose three of the core values and intentions that you wrote down in the previous exercise, and share these with your partner. Why are these important values? How can you make them real-time behaviors? How can you reward yourself along the path to achieving them?

Take five minutes to do this

Thank your partner for witnessing.

Now reverse roles. The previous speaker now actively listens, the previous listener now shares.

### **Third Exercise - Taking Intention into Action**

Create space in the room for walking about ten steps in one direction then be able to return on the same path.

Most of our intentions involve interaction with an “Other”. That may be a part of ourselves that we wish to change. It may be a person with whom we are in relationship. It may be all or part of our culture, our economic structures, our political dialogue, or our species’ behavior. This exercise is to help us in staying balanced and active in realizing our intentions.

First, stand at one end of your selected path.

Center yourself, breathe into your stance, embody yourself, a human being, active and aware, balanced and present, compassionate and skillful.

Once established in that space, bring to mind one of the intentions that you made tonight, one that seems realizable in the future, yet is challenging enough to be exciting to accomplish.

Bring to mind the other side of the intention, what may be an obstacle, what may be an ally, what needs to be accomplished

Bring to mind a decision to act towards that intention, to carry it through. Think of the next step that needs to be made, and what decision needs to happen about how to take that step.

Begin to walk, slowly, mindfully, with balance, and at your own pace.

The first three steps, bring your awareness into your present self with this intention, how you hold it, how it energizes you, how you wish to see it fulfilled.

The second three steps, bring into your awareness the “Other” in the intention, attempting to deeply understand the perceptions and positions, what needs to be fulfilled for its benefit.

The third three steps, expand your intention outward to ask of the universe its perception on the intention. What would be for the greatest good here? What needs to be accomplished? What would foster the greatest love, compassion, joy, and equanimity?

The final step, allow a decision to arise. What is the next step I can take?