

# **Good Intentions: Neurological, Contemplative, and Practical Perspectives**

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## **Basic Propositions**

Everything happens because of preceding causes. *Everything*, both inside our minds and outside in the world.

Those causes lead to results that are either beneficial or harmful, for ourselves and others.

Causes originate within yourself and outside yourself.

The primary source of the causes that originate inside you are your own intentions. As Joseph Goldstein puts it, "Everything rests on the tip of motivation."

Some of our intentions are very deliberate and conscious, while others are shadowy or altogether hidden. Multiple intentions dance, join with, and oppose each other in the mind, some have more power than others do, and our actions are the result of the net sum of all of them at any one time. Our actions reveal our true intentions.

The sphere of intention is vast, ranging from the items listed on a shopping list to our loftiest aspirations. It encompasses our goals, aims, values, drives, purposes, wants, and ideals. The influence of our intentions pervades our entire life.

This means that through establishing our intentions, we have tremendous influence over our life. Therefore, our intentions bring us both great responsibility and great opportunity.

In sum, becoming more aware of our intentions, observing their effects – for better or worse – and becoming more skillful with them is an absolutely fundamental and powerful source of benefit for ourselves and others.

## **The Neurology of Intention**

Our intentions arise in the brain, are represented in the brain, and are pursued in the brain. Where else?

Therefore, a basic understanding of how intentions work in the brain – and thus in your mind – is a very useful thing to have.

### **The Executive Functions**

The brain is like a committee, with many parts or “members” working together – or at cross purposes! – and the frontal lobes are like the chair of that committee. Or, to use a different metaphor, if the psyche altogether is a vast land, with a capital and many provinces, the frontal lobes are like the city manager of the capital.

But of course that does not mean that they are the owner of the country! An error the frontal lobes, and the self structures that identify with them, tend to make. To the loss and often the rebellion of the provinces . . .

As you can observe in your own experience, it is possible to have effective “executive functions” in the mind – those capacities that plan, organize, monitor, and direct – without much if any sense of personal self in the mix.

### **A Proper Balance**

To be sure, those executive functions are very important. A healthy nation needs both its capital and its provinces. Balance is everything, in the brain as in life. “The middle way . . .”

You might ask yourself, are you tilted either way:

- Toward an excess of executive functions, too much top-down control, not enough life breathing in the provinces, too much “head” and not enough “body” or “heart,” too much regulation, suppression and scorn directed at parts of the self, too many high judges and critics in the mind scolding the inner children and the passions, too much superego and not enough id, living too much behind city gates and not enjoying and exploring enough the rich and fertile lands outside those walls
- Toward an excess of unruly provinces, too much influence bubbling up from the bottom, not enough self-control, flooded with affect, impulsive and inattentive, a mental popcorn machine

Most of us are, indeed, tilted too much one way or another not just as a temporary imbalance but as a longstanding tendency. Certain moments call for more from the “capital” and others for more from the “provinces,” and being able to move nimbly in one direction or another without limitation or creakiness is very helpful in navigating the twists and turns of life.

So, when you see which way you are tilted, then restoring greater balance – and becoming stronger and more able with the other aspect of the psyche – can become a strategic goal for growth.

The primary way to develop your “weak suit,” in terms of optimal balance for yourself, is simply to identify the elements of it that you want to strengthen, and keep them in mind. That will mobilize resources for yourself over time that will gradually build up those capacities. Truly, 50% of personal growth is identifying the issue – whatever it is – and committing to work on it. Just that! Which is really very good news.

Held in a proper balance, establishing clear intentions – which are a way the frontal lobes call the other members of the committee to order and establish what the agenda is – is a powerful, skillful means to getting anything good done either inside your own head and heart or in the outer world.

## **Right Intention**

### **Introduction**

Of course, the first question regarding intention is, **for what?**

All the great wisdom traditions of the world, and all the great moral philosophers, have grappled with this question. What should we want?

There are many ways to approach this question. Some try to answer it in terms of discerning the will or desires of their sense of a Divine influence, of God. Others through resort to certain ideals or abstractions. And others through reliance on some kind of authority, such as a priestly class or a scripture.

In the case of the Buddha – and also some moral philosophers – he approached this question pragmatically, in terms of what leads to more or less suffering, to more or less benefit or harm to oneself and others. Intentions are good if they lead to good results, and bad if they lead to bad results.

This approach has numerous advantages. It is down to earth. It draws upon our own observation of what happens, rather than relying upon the viewpoints of others. It provides a ready test for the worth of an intention: what did it lead to, what actually happened? And it keeps turning us back to ourselves, toward how we can be ever more skillful.

The best available record of the actual teachings of the Buddha – what is called the Pali Canon after the language in which they were first written – is chock full of encouragement and practical guidance for many kinds of intentions leading to good results.

For example, in one sutta – a talk or discourse of the Buddha – he is offering a merchant guidelines for an ethical business, and in another he is advising a monk on the subtlest imaginable inclinations of mind in profoundly realized states of consciousness. In one of my favorite suttas, the Buddha tells his seven-year-old son, Rahula, that knowing how to act in life is actually very simple: before you do something, consider if it will lead to benefit or harm, and if it will be beneficial, go ahead; then, while you are doing things, keep considering if they are beneficial or not, and if they are, it's alright to continue them.

In this context of diversity and individuality of wholesome intentions, the Buddha singled out three in particular. They are contained in what is called Right Intention, which is one of the parts of the Eightfold Path; that Path is the last of the Four Noble Truths, and it describes the way leading to the end of suffering.

By the way, Right (or Wise) Intention is sometimes translated as "Right Resolve," which conveys the determination, firmness of aim, heartfelt conviction, and persistence that are central to right intention. Let's see what those three intentions were, that the Buddha thought were so important that they deserved such emphasis.

### **Intention of harmlessness**

This is a broad aim of not causing pain, loss, or destruction to any living thing. At a minimum, this is a sweeping resolution to avoid any whit of harm to another human being. The implications are far-reaching, since most of us participate daily in activities whose requirements or ripples may involve harm to others (e.g., use of fossil fuels that warms the planet, purchasing goods manufactured in oppressive conditions).

Further, in American culture there is a strong tradition of rugged individualism in which as long as you are not egregiously forceful or deceitful, "let the buyer beware" on the other side of daily transactions. But if your aim is preventing any harm, then the other person's free consent does not remove your responsibility.

Taking it a step further, to many, harmlessness means not killing bothersome insects, rodents, etc. Even as you feel the mosquito sticking its needle into your neck. And to many, harmlessness means eating a vegetarian diet (and perhaps forgoing milk products, since cows need to have calves to keep their milk production flowing, and half of those calves are male, who will eventually be slaughtered for food).

Nonetheless, we need to realize that there is no way to avoid all harms to other beings that flow inexorably through our life. If we are to eat, we must kill plants, and

billions of bacteria die each day as we pass wastes out of our bodies. If we get hired for a job, that means another person will not be.

But what we can do is to have a sincere aspiration toward harmlessness, and to reduce our harms to an absolute minimum. And that makes all the difference in the world.

### **Intention of non-ill will**

Here we give up angry, punishing reactions toward others, animals, plants, and things. If such attitudes arise, we resolve not to feed them, and to cut them off as fast as we can.

The Buddha placed great stress on the importance of releasing ill will. In the extreme, he said that even when we are being grossly mistreated by others, we should practice good will toward them, and wish them the best.

To be sure, that does not mean turning a blind eye toward injustice and mistreatment – of ourselves as well as others – nor does it mean turning our back on skillful actions of protection, advocacy, and betterment. It is perfectly appropriate to defend yourself, assert yourself, pursue your own interests – and to do all that on behalf of others, too – as long as all that is done in the spirit of wisdom and good will. This stance is seen pointedly and poignantly in the Dalai Lama’s reference to “. . . my friends, the enemy Chinese.”

Of course, in daily life, practicing with ill will is often extremely difficult – especially when we feel we’ve been truly wronged. For help, please see the article, “21 Ways to Turn Ill Will to Good Will,” at [www.WiseBrain.org](http://www.WiseBrain.org). As a summary, those ways are listed here:

1. Be mindful of the priming.
2. Practice non-contention.
3. Inspect the underlying trigger.
4. Be careful about attributing intent to others.
5. Put what happened in perspective.
6. Cultivate lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.
7. Practice generosity.
8. Investigate ill will.
9. Regard ill will as an affliction.
10. Settle into awareness of ill will, but don’t be identified with it.
11. Accept the wound.
12. Do not cling to what you want.
13. Let go of the view that things are supposed to be a certain way.

14. Release the sense of self.
15. " . . . *ill will is suppressed by the first jhana based on lovingkindness and eradicated by the path of nonreturning.*"
16. Resolve to meet mistreatment with lovingkindness.
17. Cultivate positive emotion.
18. Communicate.
19. Have faith that they will inherit their own karmas one day.
20. Realize that some people will not get the lesson.
21. Forgive.

### **Intention of renunciation**

Renunciation is founded on a disenchantment with the world and with experience, based on right view. You see through all the possibilities of experience: you see their ephemeral, insubstantial, empty qualities, no matter how alluring or seemingly gratifying. You see the suffering embedded in the experience, the "trap," as the Buddha put it. And you see the happiness, peace, and love available in not chasing after pleasure or resisting pain.

Based on this clear seeing, you align yourself with the wisdom perspective and with the innate, prior, always already existing wakeful, pure, peaceful, and radiant awareness within yourself. In so doing, you renounce worldly things and worldly pleasures. If they pass through your awareness - a sunset, a child's smile, chocolate pudding, Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> - fine; just don't cling to them as they disappear as all experiences do.

Renunciation is NOT asceticism, or privation for privation's sake. It is a joyous union with the path of happiness that happens to include a relinquishing, casting off, abandoning, walking away from any seeking at all of worldly gratifications.

At its heart, renunciation is simple: we just let go. Ajahn Chah: "*If you let go a little, you will have a little happiness. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of happiness. If you let go completely, you will be completely happy.*"

### **Other Good Intentions**

Besides the three fundamental intentions above, what other aims or values would really serve you, and others? How about:

- Feeling more relaxed and calm
- Deepening your well-being and capacity to contribute to others
- Working through something that's been bothering you
- Giving up an addiction or other unwholesome behavior

- Coming to terms – and to peace – with a difficult life situation, such as a major illness

Or you could shoot for the stars and focus on a primary purpose in life. Such as liberation, awakening, Nirvana, enlightenment. Or abiding in love – all the time.

### Expressing Your Intentions

Once your intentions are clear, the next question is: **How to express them?**

There are many ways, including

- As thoughts in your mind
- As an image
- In writing
- As a collage with words and images
- Through physical expression, posture, movement, dance
- As a sense of being

When you think intentions, you know them to yourself. Putting them in explicit words is usually helps create real clarity in your mind. Some intentions co-exist as equally vital, but many times it's important to establish what your top priorities are. It's kind of like filling a bucket: you want to get the big rocks in first, then the pebbles, and last the sand. Your most important aims are the big rocks, and if you take care of them, everything else usually works out just fine.

The nonverbal expression of intentions is through imagery. For all the emphasis in education and in our culture on language – certainly an important tool – it's good to keep in mind that most of the brain, and most of our mental processes (especially unconscious ones) have nothing to do with language at all. A picture is indeed worth a thousand words, and pictures in your mind of your intentions – including both the path toward them and their fulfillment – are very, very valuable.

You can also write out your intentions, perhaps informally – as in a to-do list – or formally, as affirmations. These are complete sentences, positively stated, with the result already existing in the present. Like this: “I am healthy, happy, and whole.” “My family is full of love and harmony.” “I am completing my college education.” “My wife loves me.”

Collages are another powerful way to express your intentions. I have collages on the wall of my office at home that were made several years ago yet they still speak to me; I look at them, and know what I'm supposed to do.

Or you could move your body as an expression of your intention, letting it move through you as you walk or dance or whatever

Last and definitely not least, you could get the feeling of the intention in your body, and rest in that sense of being. For example, if your intention is to be loving, rest in the sense of being loving. If it is to be highly focused and productive, get a sense of being that way, and then abide there. Be the goal you are aiming for.

### **Is the Intention a Goal or Already Realized?**

This last point brings us to the third question: **Do you express the intention as a goal or as something already realized?**

This gets at a recurring question, even a debate, in Buddhism (and also in psychology and in some religions): Is it about progressing toward an enlightened state, or is it about uncovering the enlightened condition that has always been present? I can't do justice here to the nuances of that consideration, but I can say what many wise people think is at the marrow of the matter: *both* are true. (Darn that middle way.)

In other words, it is powerful to focus on intention both as an aim toward a target, and as something that is already the case. The phrasing, "May \_\_\_\_\_" is a nice way to accomplish this, since "May I be happy" or "May the world be at peace" both embody an aim and an actuality.

And of these two, aim and actuality, it's usually best to emphasize the latter, the sense of the intention as already realized. For example, one thing that makes the affirmation form of verbalized intentions powerful (whether written, spoken, or thought), is that they are expressed in the present.

We are such a goal-directed culture, and there are so many associations of striving, frustration, and disappointment related to pursuing goals in the minds of so many of us, that there is often greater openness inside to intentions expressed as already true. *We are already that way. Our circumstances are already that way.*

This also points us to a greater recognition of, and gratitude and appreciation for, what is already good and working and wholesome and wonderful inside ourselves and outside, in our world. This feels good in its own right, which is very good for your brain! And you! And others!

And it directs us toward resources we may have missed, both inside and outside. There really *is* a profound wisdom and peacefulness already within us – in

Buddhism, sometimes called Buddha mind, or bodhichitta. And a beautiful, wonderful harmony latent in the world.

For example, the “resting state” of the brain has a neurological coherence, a quiet hum of relaxed readiness, and a saturation with mildly positive emotion. That is what you return to when something is resolved, and that is what you return to if you start with a positive state and then jiggle it, such as with EMDR or other psychological techniques.

All this means that the universe and mother nature and spirit are all on your side. So, in a sense, a lot of what anyone of us is really trying to do is to re-access a sense of the innate nature of the brain - of our own nature as beings - and settle ever more deeply into that always already true and present condition. Kind of like settling into a cozy comforter in our bed that is home base.

Perhaps take a moment to see if you can sense into your preexisting Buddha nature, inner goodness, spark of the Divine within - in whatever way you experience or name that.

### **How Firmly Should You Pursue Your Intentions?**

Then, last, **how firmly do you pursue your intentions?** Again, neither too tight nor too loose a rein.

As with the balance of the capital city and the provinces, it's worth considering what your tendencies are and if there is an imbalance. For example, some of us hold onto our goals to a fault (myself, ahem) going down with the ship - pull up! It's a trap!! - while others give up way too soon or don't take their own needs and wants seriously enough.

From the Buddhist perspective, the path that leads to the greatest well-being and goodness for oneself and others steers clear of over-striving on the one hand - clinging is, after all, the primary engine of suffering - yet is also guided by Right Intention and other wholesome aims.

The importance of this side of the balance - of perseverance guided by goodness - is seen in one of my favorite phrases of the Buddha. Appearing in many places in the Pali Canon, indicating its importance, it describes worthy practitioners as “ardent, resolute, diligent, and mindful.” All these speak to a real dedication.

In my experience, more people err on the side of being flabby or fearful in their resolutions, and not enough of an ally to themselves, than err on the side of being

obsessively driven toward important goals. And of course, within the same person, there may be goals that he or she is too lax about as well as goals that he or she is too obsessive about.

You could reflect on how you might come to better balance for yourself with regard to your strength of resolution. Consider both the goals you could be too driven about . . . . and the goals you could be too lax about.

### **Conclusion**

As we consider the fruits of our intentions – Are they bitter or sweet? – it is easy to veer into the pitfalls of guilt and shame on the one side, and self-congratulation and conceit on the other. Instead, the wise course is to be clear-eyed, even-keeled, and encouraging with yourself, continually focused on your learning and growth, on how you can become a little better person every day.

For yourself. For everyone around you. And for the whole wide world.