

RIGHT INTENTION

Sammā Saṅkappa

What is motivating you to read these words right now? From one moment to the next, something is moving you to put forth the energy to read, to reflect, and to attempt to understand. Something is aiming the mind such that it wants to know more about a whole-life application of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Behind every action, even every thought, there is an intention: no intention + no thought = no action. Right intention sits at the interface of mind and how we live. As the mental factor that propels and guides everything we think and do, it saturates every moment of our lives.

Intention is also the aim of the heart. It has to do with purpose and motivation, and it flows from an unspoken sense of direction that connects our life perspective with how we act. It is the emotional element that flows from right view and gives impetus to right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

Right intention (*sammā saṅkappa*) arises naturally from right view. If we have right view—when we really get how suffering

works, how it is caused, and how its causes can be abandoned—it just makes sense, both emotionally and intellectually, to apply that knowledge. We want to. As a practice, right intention is implementing the understanding of right view to deliberately aim the mind. As a ripened quality, right intention is more intimate than wanting to apply some principle; it manifests as the spontaneous emotional blossoming of understanding in a way that bears action as its fruit.

We might think of right view as a map showing the route to a desired destination. Right intention is both the big choice to use that map and the many smaller choices—one at every intersection—to follow its guidance right here, right now. Sometimes the map is known and accessed by the thinking mind; usually the map is known intuitively and functioning naturally. Cognitively or intuitively, right intention registers as volition; it flows from prior urges and actions, and it conditions future ones. It also calls up the emotional energy or motivation to keep moving across the terrain; it is the urge to take a step in a certain direction before actually taking that step. Without the impetus of right intention, right view remains unconnected to action or to life—a map framed and hung on the wall as decoration.

FACETS OF INTENTION

To work with intention, we need to first understand what is meant by the word *saṅkappa*. Common definitions include “thought,” “intention,” “purpose,” and “plan.” Because it flows from right view, intention that is *sammā*, “right,” will be aimed towards attitudes and actions that support the cessation of hunger and ignorance.

In looking at right view, we saw how the Buddha divided thoughts into two groups according to their effects. Right view sees what leads to the arising of suffering, *dukkha*, and what leads to its cessation. The thoughts (*vitakka*) he was sorting, however, were described in the categories of *saṅkappa*, intention: thoughts of sensual desire or renunciation, thoughts of ill will or goodwill, thoughts of cruelty or compassion.³⁸ These three basic emotional inclinations

are the Buddha’s technical distillation of what he meant by intention. Renunciation is rooted in wisdom, non-ill will in *mettā*, and noncruelty in compassion.

One of my teachers, Venerable Punnaḥi, translated *saṅkappa* as “disposition” or “orientation.” This understanding implies an inclination or tendency with some stability: right disposition, right orientation. The disposition towards renunciation, the disposition towards non-ill will, the disposition towards noncruelty. The orientation towards renunciation, the orientation towards non-ill will, the orientation towards noncruelty. This understanding brings out a sense of something extended in time and anchored in habit or character—the latent tendencies of the mind from which momentary impulses spring.

It can be useful to also consider other translations of *saṅkappa*, such as “resolve” or “directing the mind.” The word *direction*, for instance, can help us see how the mind is heading somewhere, orienting in a certain way in the present. The future is also implied: “this is where I’m headed.”

The idea of direction easily takes a passive sense: the mind is naturally directed by the views it holds. We are not always aware of why we’re doing what we do. Some actions don’t even seem to have any intention behind them; we just act without forethought. Even unreflected actions, however, are not wholly without intention. Each moment of thought has a volitional aspect (*cetanā*).³⁹ But to acquiesce to whatever latent tendencies emerge too often reinforces patterns of ignorance and selfishness, especially early in our training.

Contrast this passive sense with direction’s active sense, involving will or volition: we can direct the mind actively, choosing how and where we offer our attention, and towards what goals. When the mind’s strength is directed towards a goal to which one is fully committed, the power of intention can be astonishing. The work of great leaders like Mohandas Gandhi and Nelson Mandela was directed by clear intention, and their results speak to us still.

The set points of intention can shift towards the wholesome with practice and with good friendships. They can also easily drift

towards the unwholesome by way of negative media and social influences. The mind is directed by intentions, yoked to our choices. This is why right intention is a practice worthy of the Eightfold Path towards unbinding.

PRACTICE

WRONG INTENTION

Get together with a trusted friend to explore unwholesome intentions: what is present in your mind, what it feels like when they are operating. What is the felt sense of a mind oriented towards sensual satisfaction? Consider what occupies the mind: an image of the sexual other, a remembering and longing for that sweet dessert. And the body: is it relaxed in that moment of fixation on the possession or experience you lust after?

With the mind so occupied and the body stimulated, what is the relationship with the people and tasks in front of you here and now? Are you attuned to present-moment experiences, or are you consumed with those images and thoughts of what would be acquired? And what of the mind states? With the mind directed towards acquiring and holding to pleasant sensations, is there serenity? Is there peace? Get clear about the entire experience of a mind whose intentions direct it towards attachment and away from release.

PRACTICE

NOTICING DIRECTION BY STORIES

In the *Mahācattārīsakasutta*, the Buddha includes verbal formation in a list of sub-categories of intention.⁴⁰ This highlights how images, concepts, language, and ultimately speech are involved in the forming and aiming of intention. Intention, especially as crystallized in language, spins and

maintains the constructs of this life, this “me.” We constantly tell ourselves stories and provide internal verbal commentary about the world. This storytelling forms and reforms our sense of purpose. Being mindful of intention opens us up to possibilities for escaping karmic patterns and fundamentally shifting the constructs we call personality or character.

Choose a domain of your life that is in flux right now. It might be your work, your community life, your art or other vocation, or an intimate relationship. Contemplate the stories you tell yourself: the running commentary on climate change, money, loneliness. Sense the whole tableau these stories create in the mind. Note your felt responses, the emotional tones that arise. How do these feelings orient the mind? What actions tend to flow from this stream of thought?

**MOMENTARY, EPISODIC, AND
OVERARCHING INTENTIONS**

To get a clear sense of the territory of intention to which the Buddha refers, it can help to see intention as manifesting on three different time scales: momentary, episodic, and overarching.

Momentary Intentions

The direction of the mind changes from moment to moment as we come into contact with the world. Maybe we catch sight of someone we like, and a desire to be seen arises—or maybe what appears is just or desire for material benefit. Maybe the next moment we encounter dog poop, and annoyance towards the dog’s owner arises. So the mind goes: changing direction moment by moment. We can easily be swept along by the stream of these momentary and reactive intentions because they are conditioned and largely invisible to us. Translations of *saṅkappa* as “volition” or “thought” bring out this mercurial aspect. To discover this facet of *saṅkappa* we can ask, “What is the mind’s direction in this moment?”

The Buddha's teaching on contact and perception, *phassa* and *saññā*, provides a window into the moment-by-moment processes that constitute experience, including the role intention plays.

As a visible object, the eye, and consciousness make contact, the experience of seeing arises along with a feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. At this same moment, perception—it is *this* object with *these* qualities—arises. Even such a basic aspect of experience as cognizing (i.e., consciousness, *viññāṇa*) is understood as arising based upon all prior conditioned, volitional moments (*saṅkhāra paccaya viññāṇa*).

Put in materialistic and psychological terms, each moment of experience arises conditioned by the sum of the neural and hormonal conditions. So upon contact, the ignorant body-mind reflexively grasps at experience to hold the moment near or push it away, and the resultant tension becomes the locus of “me” in that moment. Wrapped up in engagement with the object, “I am” the one seeing and feeling this now. “I am” the one wanting this lovely object or this person's kind words. Thus, the world arises one moment and vanishes the next.⁴¹

This freshly born “me,” with its archive of tendencies, gives rise to impulses that lead to action of body, speech, and mind. With mindfulness, we can see momentary intentions as they arise with sensations and flow into actions. With practice and effort, they can be redirected. We can choose to reinforce responses that support our larger-scale intentions and to release those that do not. Lust becomes dispassion; anger becomes compassion. This constitutes an ongoing and embedded practice of *sammā saṅkappa*.

PRACTICE

EXPERIENCING THE FIRST TOUCH OF THE MIND'S INCLINATION

Sit quietly, and after letting the body-mind calm down, call to mind a person or a task that feels relevant for you right now.

Notice how the thought—the words or image—touches the mind. What immediately follows that touch? Don't try to figure it out or give words to the experience. Just notice the touch and the felt response.

As you sit with this, do you notice any inclination of the mind—for example, towards friendliness or anger, towards dispassion, or towards wanting things to turn out a certain way? Don't try to manipulate the response; just being aware of it is enough right now, particularly if the mind is balanced while observing.

After you've sat with this observation for a while, how do you feel? Do you notice any change in relationship to the person or task?

Episodic Intentions

At the next time scale of intention, an overall direction has been established for a specific task or social encounter—for one small episode of our lives. Episodic intention can carry within it thought moments that are contrary to the mind's overall direction. For example, we might be volunteering at a food pantry. One moment we feel compassion for someone who is poor or injured; the next moment we feel a wave of involuntary disgust for someone who smells bad or acts abrasively. But our service commitment for the duration of that hour sustains the overall direction of the mind towards kindness and compassion, even though less skillful moment-to-moment thoughts and emotions come and go.

Translations of *saṅkappa* as “intention” and “resolve” highlight its episodic manifestation. Episodic intention involves a situation with a clear beginning and end. To discover this facet of *saṅkappa*, we can ask, before and during, “Why am I doing this . . . (this job, this social event, this practice, this task)?”

Episodic intentions are perhaps most easily seen and most workable from the standpoint of practice: at this level, we have the best

chance of effectively intervening. For example, you might resolve, "At this meeting with my brother, I'm going to focus on forgiveness no matter what he says and no matter what habitual emotions arise in me." Intention associated with specific tasks or events has some muscle in its directedness. It involves both the conscious direction of conceptual thought and the monitoring of emotion. Without such direction, episodic intentions can reinforce existing patterns that are reactive and predictable. But with mindfulness and effort, episodic intentions can be directed into new patterns—patterns that then continue to incline the mind, becoming wholesome habits.

PRACTICE

FOR JUST THIS EPISODE

Select one meeting, one encounter, during which you will resolutely practice unconditional kindness. Make certain this episode has a clear beginning and ending; this will help you maintain your energy and focus. Regardless of what the other(s) says, return to kindness; watch the mind carefully, and let all speech, even all thoughts, find their roots there. Afterwards, reflect on the experience. What did you notice? How did it feel? Do you want to try this practice again?

Overarching Intentions

The third time scale of intention involves the overall direction of one's life. Perhaps your overarching intention is to be liberated from suffering by nonclinging or not doing harm; perhaps you have devoted your life, or aspire to devote it, to compassionate service; or maybe you are aiming at comfort, both now and in old age. Whatever the intention, there will be all kinds of variations along the way. Sights and sounds and thoughts will give rise to momentary intentions of anger or love, generosity, or selfishness. Tasks and relationships

will evoke episodic commitments and orientations: an intention to be kind at a family reunion or an intention to be efficient at work, for example. But the overarching direction of our lives stands outside of time. Such intentions are a kind of beacon by which the navigation system of our lives stays oriented: towards grasping or release, compassion or selfishness.

Overarching intention is associated with long-term or life-long goals and values, and it is experienced as a broad image or felt sense of life. Translations such as "direction" and "orientation" reflect this aspect of saṅkappa. We can locate overarching intention by asking ourselves, "What is my life's direction?"

Overarching intentions are not always visible to us. Latent tendencies of the heart influence day-to-day perspectives and decisions, and we may just experience these tendencies as, "This is how things are." The Buddha spoke of them like this: "Dependent upon the ill will element [latent anger], the perception of ill will arises."⁴² That is, we see the person in front of us through the lens of preexisting anger (or insecurity, or lust, or kindness, and so on). The intention or mental direction of anger is established, leading us through the growing urges of desire and passion. It is this urge, or pressure in the heart-mind, that blossoms as we speak words of anger or withdraw in aversion.

The overarching aspect of intention is the one most intimately tied to how we view the world. It constitutes the spiritual, existential tone of our lives and helps to shape momentary and episodic intentions. Overarching intentions manifest as character and are not easily shifted. When they do change, they have the power to pull our thoughts and actions along with them; that is why they are so heavily emphasized in religions and other thought systems. A vow is an overarching intention, and to take a vow is to formally commit to practicing that intention. In Buddhism, the mind is oriented towards clearly seeing present-moment experience and inclining the heart towards relinquishment and compassion. Having a Buddha-image at home to help you recollect this orientation is a practice of overarching right intention. In the Abrahamic religions

we are implored to give our lives over to the mercy of Christ, to think always of Allah, to remember the Jewish Shema: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." These are all practices for fostering a life according to a religion's values. Even without the strong overtones of faith in a divinity, however, overarching intentions can play a powerful role in our path.

PRACTICE

**DEVELOPING AND CHECKING
OVERARCHING INTENTION**

Set aside time to reflect on what values and aspirations pull you forward. Look carefully; sometimes our most deeply held values are invisible to us. Kindness to others may be lost to view; a wish for people who are suffering to find relief may seem like it's "only natural," not really a value. Look, too, for a mental direction that you may not condone. For example, most of us are continually looking for pleasurable sensations or mental entertainments. Do these congeal into an encompassing, if not always visible, life direction?

Once you have clarified some overarching intentions, inquire whether your life actions and decisions are aligned with them. If actions are aligned with the unwholesome or futile directions, by what gradual path might this alignment be altered? If your life is not yet strongly inclined towards wholesome intentions, what images, practices, stories, friendships, employment, study, and reflection might bring about a gradual, patient, and enduring shift in that direction? Are there vows or rituals, domestic or community supports, that will help maintain and increase these overarching intentions?

This practice can be done alone or with a trusted and respected friend.

Nested Intentions

The three time scales of intention are overlapping and interwoven. The shorter scales are nested within the longer. What you think (momentary saṅkappa) and the plans and resolutions behind what you do (episodic saṅkappa) are important because they shape your life's trajectory and goals (overarching saṅkappa). Taking the question associated with each of the three time frames from the bottom up, we see that "What is the basis of thought in this moment?" is nested inside "Why am I doing this action?" and both are contained within the overarching question, "What is my life's direction?" This interweaving of long and short scales of intention can also be seen in the reverse direction, top to bottom: good overarching intentions condition good task-based intentions, and both together condition immediate, moment-to-moment intentions—kindness here and now. (See figure 1.)

These three aspects of intention became clear to me one morning when I was first exploring these ideas. I had been observing how these teachings were operating in my mind and working out my thoughts in writing since before dawn. Then it was time to wake my youngest son, Max, for school. Reflecting on my current mind state, I became aware that my overarching intention in relation to my son was towards love and compassion: to help him be comfortable and confident in the world. More broadly, my whole life was oriented in no small part towards kindness and the release that comes from service.

I was also aware of intentions limited to that specific, small time frame: the orientation of feelings and thoughts around the tasks of

Figure 1 Nested Intentions

