

Preparation for Living with Intention (January theme)

It's January, time for resolutions. We will live intentionally, we tell ourselves. We will make goals and achieve them – lose weight, exercise more, learn to play the guitar.

We may or may not keep our resolutions, but the desire to live intentionally – to align our actions with our thoughts and beliefs – is powerful. The most powerful intentions, however, may not be associated with achievement-oriented goals like “lose 10 pounds” but instead with living a good, meaningful life. Buddhism puts “right intention” as part of the Eight-fold path to a good life and ultimately to enlightenment. In Hindu and Buddhist traditions, intention is linked to karma and the way that our thoughts determine our actions and the ultimate outcome of our lives.

How do we align our thoughts and beliefs with our actions? Spiritual teachers tell us to begin by “setting an intention.” Consider with your mind and heart what is most important to you. Write your intention down. Instead of writing it as a negative or “do better” goal (“I will avoid perfectionism”), make a positive invitation to yourself in the present: “I invite self-acceptance into my life.” You can invite joy, compassion, courage, openness to change; many intentions are about emotions or values. Or an intention could be something more specific to your circumstances, yet not an “achievement” goal: to see your partner as an individual, to let your creativity flow, to balance work and rest.

When we have set an intention, we can live it in our daily actions. Many spiritual teachers suggest that *intention* is linked with *attention* – maintaining awareness. Each day, rekindle the intention with a practice – a ritual, a meditation, an affirmation, a prayer, a song or dance. Then hold the intention in your attention to shape your daily actions. An intention for compassion may be general, but it increases your awareness of individual possibilities for compassionate action and thought throughout the day.

Intentions are key to good actions, but do not guarantee good results. We sometimes cause unintentional hurt – a careless remark to a friend, a failure to respect co-workers, a microaggression toward someone who is different from us. Sometimes we combine apology and self-justification, saying “I’m sorry I hurt you. That wasn’t my *intent* at all.” Our intention, however, matters less than the action’s impact – the person’s hurt. Our actions are also affected by our complex, interrelated world. We walk by a florist and have a loving intention about giving flowers to someone – but then realize that the flowers might have been grown with pesticides, harvested by exploited workers, and transported by air, damaging the environment. We might decide to get flowers from a better source.

Reflecting on actions and impacts is in fact part of living with intention. When we apologize for our action’s impact or consider our actions in larger contexts, we are understanding our intentions more deeply. The process works in the other direction as well: reflecting on our good actions helps us see other people’s good intentions, the good in the world, and the good in ourselves. Some psychologists suggest a daily practice that combines gratitude with reflecting upon intention. We recall experiences for which we are grateful, and we also consider the intentions and actions and circumstances that brought us to those experiences. Such reflection can lead to new intentions, even surprising ones: “Honor thy error as a hidden intention,” suggest Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt in *Oblique Strategies*.

So – it’s January, and we can make resolutions and track our exercise or guitar practice, if that works. But for the things that are most important, we can consider setting an intention and creating a practice to rekindle it daily. We can also reflect on intention and impact – not to find failings, but to deepen our understanding of the value in ourselves and in our reality. Purity of intention isn’t what we seek; instead we look for whole-heartedness to live intentionally with others in a complex world.

Consider these quotes as you reflect on living with intention.

Just because I'm going to do this imperfectly does not mean that I should not do it at all ... So my words will be imperfect. But I pray that both the intention and impact of my words are of service.

Layla F. Saad

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

Henry David Thoreau

Individual intent is not necessary for systemic evil. *Jamie Arpin-Ricci*

Meditation is about choosing where my attention goes ... And that when I am overcome by sadness, loss, anger, joy, desire, restlessness, or other emotions, it helps to be able to drop into myself and choose – to be with the emotions intentionally. *adrienne maree brown*

It sounds ridiculous to make paradoxical resolutions like “Force myself to wander” or “Schedule time for play,” but if I don't put these things on my calendar, and score myself on my Resolutions Chart, I just won't do them. *Gretchen Rubin*

When we develop the habit of noticing our intentions, we have a much better compass with which to navigate our lives ... And it frees us to see more clearly into what our actions mean to us and how we can genuinely manifest what we love and care about. We have the power to create our lives from the inside out. *Sharon Salzberg*

Our power lies in our small daily choices, one after another, to create eternal ripples of a life well lived. *Mollie Marti*

Questions to Ponder

1. If you have set any intentions recently or are considering setting intentions, describe them.
2. What intentions and what goals have been important in your life? Reflect on connections between your intentions and your goals.
3. If there have been events that nudged you to re-set your intentions, describe how that happened.
4. Have you used any practices to help you live your intentions? How do you plan to nourish your intentions?
5. Have you ever hurt someone unintentionally, or has someone ever hurt you unintentionally? Reflect on how that happened and how it felt. Were you able to repair that situation?
6. Many people get discouraged about the difficulty of carrying out good intentions about things like social justice, climate change, or helping others. How do you deal with those concerns?

Words of the Day

What would you like to build, create, or nurture in your life? Write a positive intention to invite that into your life. The Words of the Day sentence is “I set an intention to ... ”