

The Power of Intention

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*Every day, think as you wake up: Today I am fortunate to have woken up.
I am alive, I have a precious human life. I am not going to waste it.*

The Dalai Lama

To make the most of your life, to nourish the causes of happiness for yourself and others, it takes strength, clear intentions, and persistent effort. This essay explores how to establish powerful intentions and sustain the commitment to see them come true.

Setting Clear Intentions

As humans evolved, stacking one floor above another on the neuroaxis in the brain, our horizons expanded. We gradually extended the time between stimulus and response, and the space between our own actions and their outermost ripples. The wider your view, the wiser your intentions. So it's good to ask yourself: *How wide is my view?* It's natural to spend most of your time focusing on what's right in front of you, but every so often it's worth considering questions like these:

- What good and bad effects will my lifestyle today have on me 20 years from now?
- What do I do that helps and harms my planet?
- How do my love and my anger affect others?
- What could be the long-term results of intensifying my psychological growth and spiritual practices?

And how *high* is your aim? One time at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, my spiritual "home base," my friend and teacher, Sylvia Boorstein, silenced a room full of several hundred people when she asked a simple question: *What about enlightenment?* She went on to point out that the Buddha, like all the great teachers, always encouraged people toward the most complete realization possible. Whether or not you connect with the notion of enlightenment or related ideas like union with God, each one of us has a sense deep down of the ultimate possibilities of a human life. If you haven't taken those possibilities seriously and gone after them, why not start now? Is there truly a good reason not to?

Personally, I've never heard a good reason. But like just about everyone, I keep forgetting this and losing my way in the sheer busyness of life. Further, the lower floors of the neuroaxis naturally pull us toward aims that are immediate and concrete

– not because the brainstem, hypothalamus, and limbic system are base or sinful, but simply because they are more primitive in an evolutionary sense. Then your horizons shrink to the next few months and the small circle around you.

Skillful Intending

Much as you can see farther from an upstairs window, the uppermost layer of your brain is key to creating and pursuing the widest, highest, and wisest aims. So in this article I'll emphasize using the prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) to do just that, starting with these general considerations about how to be skillful at intending.

Seeing Clearly

Intentions are effective when they are grounded in reality, in what is really true. Here are some things that will help:

- Cultivate *wanting* to know the facts of your inner and outer worlds. Take in the rewards of seeing clearly, like feeling safer.
- Slow down. Give your cortex time to understand what is actually happening, what led up to it, and what an appropriate response would be.
- Stay mindful of the big picture. In the larger mosaic of a situation, notice if you're focusing on one tile out of a hundred.
- Notice how limbic and brainstem processes tilt cortical ones, and vice versa. For example, the brain uses feedback from "in here" – particularly your autonomic nervous system, muscles, heart, and gut – to form beliefs that are often mistaken about what is happening "out there." Or see how an anxious temperament inflates threats, or a glum mood downplays opportunities. Use this awareness to challenge your appraisals and judgments: is a situation truly a 7 on the zero-to-ten Ugh scale, or more like a 2? As Oscar Wilde once wrote: *The worst things in my life never actually happened to me.*
- Pay attention to intention itself. It determines the full consequences of your thoughts, words, and deeds.

Pull quote

When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?

John Maynard Keynes

Non-harming

This is a central principle in ethics, morality, and virtue. Fundamentally, it's enlightened self-interest. Since we're all connected together, not harming others decreases the harms that would come back to hurt you. Similarly, not harming *yourself* reduces harms to others.

Do's and Don't's

Intentions can be positive (do) or negative (don't). Positive statements are more informative, because they spotlight the bullseye rather than just tell you what to avoid hitting. But negative statements are more powerful, since they draw on the intense, "lower floor" withdrawal and freeze circuitry of the brain. That's why they're used so often.

For your own intentions, it's natural to use both forms. The positive one breathes inspiration and life into moral conduct; for example, "be generous" is a joyful balance to "do not steal." And sometimes it's necessary to have a very clear NO sign in front of certain actions, like being very clear that you just never lie to your mate, no matter what.

The View from the Porch

Now, to expand the horizons of your intentions, here's one of my all-time favorite exercises.

Relax, and take a few breaths. Settle as deeply as you can into a feeling of calm and well-being.

Imagine that you are sitting comfortably somewhere many years from now. Your health and your mind are intact. You are in your 90's or older, toward the end of your lifespan, sitting on a porch in a comfortable chair, with a beautiful view down a long valley below. There may be other people around, or maybe not, however you like.

Sitting there in your chair, you feel really good, really contented. Then you start reflecting back upon the life you've had, from the vantage point of a comfortable old age.

Looking back from the porch, what are you happy about? Consider different parts of your life, such as friends and family, work and career, good times and bad, personal and spiritual development, creativity, health, self-expression, and service.

Keep restoring the perspective of looking back from the porch, from a comfortable old age.

What are some of the things you feel grateful for?

What has been really important in your life?

What are you glad that you stood for?

What do you wish you had done differently?

What have been the central guiding values and principles of your life?

What qualities or aspects of your life make you glad that you have lived, and at peace with your life ending some day?

Looking back, what would you say to a younger version of yourself? Such as the age you are today.

Take a few moments to let all this sink in. You might like to write down some of your reflections.

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A simple exercise, but for most people, quite a powerful one. Humans have a unique ability to do mental time travel, to use the simulation capabilities of the prefrontal cortex to visit the lived past and the imagined future in vivid detail. By visualizing a future and then turning around to look back at the past – some of which is actually still to come for you! – the exercise tricks and dislocates the brain’s time traveling functions, sometimes jarring open a fresh clarity about those things that matter most.

Identify Your Purposes in Life

Looking back from “the porch,” can you see any overarching purposes that sum up the things that are most important to you in this life? Perhaps love, or joy, or discovery, or service, or spiritual realization. Or? Is there one fundamental purpose in your life that is your highest and best aim, your guiding star?

Explicit, consciously held life purposes are a useful corrective to your brain’s tendency to scan continually for opportunities and threats. That keeps drawing your attention and actions toward short-term and local possibilities, thus narrowing your horizons. And because it is rooted in the lower floors of the neuroaxis, the carrots and sticks it identifies are usually simple, even primal.

So, to keep your eyes on the big prize, how about writing down your life purpose(s)? This could seem daunting, but you can change it later. Pushing yourself to get something down on paper, even if it's not exactly right, can break any logjams. Go for it! What will bring the highest happiness, the greatest peace to your life?

Try on the feeling of different words. Find ones that evoke an *experience* of the state of being you want as the basis of your life. Positive, present-tense language works best. For example, instead of *I will find love*, how about *There is love in my life* or *I am love*. The positive words stimulate the approach networks of your brain, compensating for their relative weakness compared to the survival-focused avoidance circuitry. And regarding your purpose as a present reality tells your brain that this is the new normal, rather than something implicitly always out there in the distance - out of reach.

Find imagery as well for your purposes, such as collages made out of pictures and headlines, from magazines, that are combined however you like, neatly or slap dash. You can make a collage on notepaper, but I find it's more fun to use a 2' x 3' posterboard. In my office at home, three collages hang on the wall, and when I glance at them, they touch my heart and nudge my mind in the right direction. You could also just find a single picture that says everything to you and keep it where you can see it every day, like in your appointment book or on your car's dashboard.

As your purposes clarify, try to feel them in your body, and imagine them sinking down the neuroaxis, becoming increasingly embedded at deeper and deeper levels. Bring them to mind from time to time, and see how that changes your day. Perhaps weave a regular renewal of commitment to your life's purposes into your meditation or other spiritual practices. Purpose is effective if it is *felt*, kept in awareness, and taken seriously: holding it in front of your mind like a rider holding a carrot in front of a horse.

Clarify Your Major Priorities

Your fundamental *purposes* in life are supported by major *priorities*, which are fulfilled through specific *commitments* (see just below). When your purposes, priorities, and commitments all line up together toward positive ends, that creates a virtuous, effective, and happy life.

To clarify your true priorities, write a list of the major areas of your life. Like Health, Spirituality, Love, Pleasure, Marriage, Childrearing, Career, Creative Expression, and Finances. Create categories that mean something to you, and you can have as many as you like.

Next, consider how important each area or aim is to you. Bring to mind the view from the porch, looking back from old age: what will you want your priorities to have been? Open up to the longings in your heart: what are they saying to you?

Then, make a new list of the major areas or aims of your life, this time in order of greatest priority. Number them, with #1 being the most important. Sorry, no ties are allowed! Ask yourself: *If I could have just one of those priorities fulfilled, which would it be?* Then take that one off the list, and repeat the question with the remaining priorities, and so on.

When you have your numbered priority list, ask yourself if you are being true to it. Are you allocating resources such as time and attention consistent with your real priorities? Most of us put a lot of effort into things that don't actually have much pay-off while giving short shrift to things that do. As you reflect, it's common to feel some discomfort, and if that's the case, use it to motivate yourself to live truer to your priorities. You're drawing on cortical capabilities – especially those mediated by the anterior cingulate (ACC) – to resolve conflicts among priorities and get all levels of the neuroaxis pointed in the same direction.

What would a typical day be like if you really lived according to your highest priorities? Whenever you think about living that way, pay attention to the rewards you'd experience and let them sink in, gradually inclining your brain and your mind toward them.

Living in greater alignment with your highest priorities probably means a few small but significant changes. What could you do, realistically, starting today to live more in that way? And how could you start nudging your life so that a year from now, it is as congruent as possible with your most heartfelt priorities?

Make Specific Commitments

Now let's translate your purposes and priorities into specific commitments. (You could also regard these as agreements with yourself or precepts.) The lower levels of the neuroaxis don't process abstractions, so giving them concrete instructions mobilizes them most effectively.

Get a piece of paper and put the #1 priority area of your life at the top of it as a heading. Then list specific do's and don't's beneath it that will nourish it for real, bringing benefits that are both immediate and grow over time. For example, if your top priority is loving relationships, you could consider committing to things like:

Never speak or act out of anger with my children
Say at least one kind thing each day to my partner

*Don't let Bob/Mary/whoever get to me
 Have friends over for dinner once a month
 Include a compassion practice my daily meditation*

Each of these moves you toward a priority and is a natural expression of that priority; each one is both a means to an end and an end in itself. Start by regarding the do's and don't's as tentative, up for consideration (pencil is good for this), but by the end, make a genuine commitment to whatever remains on your list. Then repeat this for each of the other priorities, going through them in order (so the next one is #2). Keep imagining what your life would be like if you actually did what was on your list, focusing on the rewards that would come – happiness, a clear conscience, a peaceful marriage, progress toward important ambitions, spiritual growth – and soaking them in.

Notice any resistance to pinning yourself down. While it's certainly true that you will pursue your intentions in many ways outside of these commitments, it's also very useful to tap the executive, conflict-resolving powers of the cortex to direct the bustling brain and thus regulate the unruly mind. Also, to borrow a theme from Buddhism, think of these commitments not as commandments it would be a sin to violate but as “trainings” you undertake to purify your mind and heart. They're skillful means, not edicts from on high. Take your commitments seriously, but don't get so worried about breaching them that you don't make them in the first place. A little wiggle room encourages conscientiousness.

When you're done, look over your lists. Get a sense of the benefits to you and others of actually living your life this way. Have the experience of those benefits sink in.

Recall the view from the porch, and imagine that you – as that older, future you – are reflecting on what happened in your life when you started living *each day* according to the lists you just made. Looking backwards from that future point in time, imagine how your life changed for the better, including in specific areas, such as your career, family, health, or spirituality.

Then see if you are willing to commit to this plan for your life in a serious, real way. If not, so be it, but if yes, GREAT.