

“Intentionally Now”

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For the last few years, I have read an Elin Hildebrand novel in January. If you are not familiar with Hildebrand, she writes romance novels, most of which are based in Nantucket in summer. Called the “queen of beach reads,” I read her novels *in January* to escape to the beach, to summer, to a different scene than the gray, cold, snowy world of winter. Sometimes a bit of escape can feel great. But right now, it *is* winter. And it *is* cold. If I mentally drift too far into thinking that it is a warm summer day, I risk distractedly wandering outside woefully underdressed in a sundress and sandals. Knowing *when* we are can help us make appropriate and intentional actions.

Yet it can be very hard to stay with the moment we are now in. Our minds are easily tugged into the past or the future. The past calling to us with a nostalgic tune of better days and simpler times. The future clamoring for our attention: “Aren’t you worried about this terrible thing happening? You should do something *now!*” Images of the past or the future can sometimes feel more present to us than the person seated beside us or the forkful of food we are putting in our mouth.

And yet, our choices are only made in the *present* moment, in the now. We cannot go back to redo choices. We cannot force the future into specific decisions. All our choices happen *now*. But staying in the present moment can be hard. Our minds are often a swirl of messages about the ‘way it *was*’ and the ‘way it *could/should* be’. We may feel like the past we experienced is receding further and further away while the future we imagined is crumbling. In this place of an ever-changing now, we may feel dispirited by all we cannot control.

But there *will* always be so much we cannot control or change, yes? Regrets from the past. Dreams for a future that we now know will not come to pass. Still, we wake to another day with its landscape of time challenging us to consider: what will you do with this next hour? this day? this next—or possibly last—chapter of your life? Do you know what you *intend* to do?

Throughout this month, we are asking what could it mean to live with intention? This question emerges from the section of our 1630 Covenant that reads, “[we] doe hereby solemnly, and religiously... promisse, and bind ourselves.” Like the other sections of this founding agreement of the church, the language needs some [reimagining](#). Today the word

“solemn” often connotes “formal and dignified”—reinforcing the image of the Puritans as killjoys. However, solemn also conveys a sense of acting with deep sincerity. In this sense, the Puritans are seeking to be sincere, not hypocrites, acting from a place of honesty and integrity. Likewise, the term “religiously” is not about how “churchy” or dogmatic they could be. Rather, “religiously” signifies *regular*—as in, he *religiously* flossed his teeth daily. Together, “solemnly” and “religiously” convey a sense of acting from a place of devoted attention and *intention* for how they lived every day.

As you may know, living with intention is a key idea in Buddhist thought. In an essay on intention, Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg relates a story of being new to yoga and to the Sanskrit words for the poses. She writes:

One day as my teacher, John Friend, was demonstrating a pose, he made an awkward-looking movement, then rebalanced. Coming out of it he asked, *“What just happened?”* One by one, my classmates offered a Sanskrit name for that extra little twist. Finally, John turned to me and repeated his question, *“What just happened?”* I replied, *“To be honest, I think you fell.”* *“You’re right,”* he said. *“I fell. Then I started over. That’s good yoga.”*

Salzberg highlights how after John fell, he “reawakened” his intention and rebalanced. Intention is not the same as perfect action. Intention is about an ongoing relationship with what we believe is possible or right. We might fall again and again in our efforts to align ourselves to our intended behavior, attitude, or actions. But we can rebalance, returning to our intention to be kinder, less jealous, more attentive to our kids, less attentive to our screens, or other intentions we may hold.

Describing the comprehensive place of intentions in our lives, Buddhist teacher [Gloria Taraniya Ambrosia](#) writes:

The Buddha tells us that intention is active not only in the things we do and say, but also in what we think. It is the force that drives action through body, speech and mind. It’s like the rudder of a ship. It even directs our attention, determining what we attend to.

As a rudder, intention is not the same as a “goal” or five-point plan focused on achievements. Rather, intention is more akin to a life stance for everyday interactions. For example, do we intend to engage others with kindness or with indifference, with greed or with generosity? By impacting how we live in any moment, intention permeates our actions and thus shapes who we are and the shape of our lives.

Admittedly, I have much to learn about Buddhism and Buddhist ideas of intention. For me, living with intention means deliberately choosing how I will show up in the world. Will I spend my entire drive into work feeling rushed and frustrated with other drivers? Or will I notice the ice on the Charles River, appreciate the music on the radio, or slow down to kindly let another driver merge? Or how might my everyday life change if I brought the intention of kindness to my interactions with the grocery store cashier, to how I relate to my partner Bill at the end of a long day, or to how I respond to a person with whom I am in conflict? Setting an intention does not mean I am perfect. Rather like John, the yoga teacher who fell, I too fall short of my intentions. Then, I keep trying. Living as we do in an ever-changing now, we can reawaken our intention in each moment.

One intention that seems increasingly important to me is to be in the *now*. We face enormous challenges right now. People are scared. Scared of the dismantling of government programs that help them to eat, have shelter, get medical care. Scared of arrests, detentions, and deportations that separate families and threaten dehumanizing treatment. Scared of what happens in 5, 10, 25 years from disbanding efforts to combat the climate crisis. Scared of not even knowing for sure what is happening and what the effects might be. It is all so overwhelming.

And so how do people who value a just and equitable society respond to racist, sexist, transphobic rhetoric and actions? How do planet loving people who believe in the urgent need to address climate change take action? How do we live *now*?

We start, I think, by paying attention to our intentions. There before any action, teaches the Buddha, is our intention. Do we intend harm or lovingkindness? Do we intend to stay attached to the future we were “supposed” to have or do we let go of that vision as we honestly assess where we *now* are? *When* are we? How do we live in *this* moment with awareness and intention?

Salzberg teaches:

“When we develop the habit of noticing our intentions, we have a much better compass with which to navigate our lives. We learn to cast a glance at our motivation before we speak or act, which frees us to live the life we want.”

Asking what it could mean to live with intention is to ask what life do you want? Like the oxygen of our breath that infuses our bodies with life, intentions infuse our lives with freely chosen purpose.

This is not to say that our intentions to live a certain way guarantee an outcome for ourselves or our shared planet. Because intentions are not goals or five-point plans.

Intentions are how we are going to show up in a world where we may repeatedly encounter disappointment, injustice, and harm. Intentions are responses to a world of suffering, including our own. And, I would suggest, intentions are also a form of spiritual resistance. By noticing our intentions, we remain free in spirit from others' dictates as we choose our own path. Each moment we can choose to respond to harm with an intention to care. We can choose to respond to hate with an intention to love. We can choose to respond to despair with an intention to remain solemnly and religiously bound to community.

Our lives are happening in *this* moment which may not resemble the world we want. Like John the yoga teacher, we may feel as if we have fallen and are off-balance in this unexpected place. And it is in this moment we can reawaken our intention, rebalance, and choose how we will continue to engage the world as it is. In many ways, I wish *now* were different—more like times in the recent past or closer to a vision of how I would like the world to be in the future. But here we are in this moment, which is the only moment we have in which to act. Knowing *when* we are can help us make appropriate and intentional actions. So how do we intend to act?

Buddhist teacher [Jack Kornfield](#) writes:

“Instead of inflaming a bad situation, we can seek ways of touching the good in another. Without denying pain and injustice, we can also look for the secret beauty of others. Our spiritual practice can be this simple: to see with eyes of compassion and act with our wisest intention. This often has a surprising effect. Nelson Mandela put it this way: “Thinking too well of people often allows them to behave better than they otherwise would.” Do not doubt the transformation that can be born out of such conscious attention.”

As we face this challenging present, may our intentions for good be a rudder to guide our thought, speech, and actions. And, may we have faith that living intentionally by our shared values of love and service, equity and generosity has transformative power. In a moment that threatens to knock us off balance, may we reawaken our intentions and rediscover our freedoms.

So may it be. Amen.