



Skillful Intention in Family Relationships I

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In this series on Skillful Intention in Family Relationships, we will look at what skillful intention is, what it isn't and how we can use it to not only decrease suffering in those relationships but to clarify what we want from them so we can increase our own happiness while we deepen our practice.

First, please do this Samma Sankappa Reflection Exercise: Setting an intention:

Get settle, breathe. Listen to the following questions and without forcing anything, focusing on your heart, see what words or images form without judgement, just flowing from your being.

What is it that I value deeply?

What do I wish for myself, for my loved ones, for the world?

Don't force any answers. Bring awareness to any part of the body that calls for attention. Does your stomach feel strange? Does your heart literally ache? Do you feel restless? Do you need a hug? Just notice these sensations and see if noticing them changes them. If there is unease, breathe and offer yourself loving kindness, placing a hand on your heart if that helps.

Skillful Intention/Right Resolve

What it is and what role does it play in developing positive family relationships

The Dalia Lama was asked, "Why do our love ones drive us crazy, especially crazy?" He answered, "because we want them to be different than who they are."

Our close family relationships can be some of the most important relationships in our lives, yet they can also be the source of incredible suffering. And this suffering can often feel intense and unique because these relationships are not ones we choose. We are born into a set of conditions, geographic, genetic with all of their existing dynamics of generational habits of relating, disfunction and unwritten rules and expectations.

It's like we are directing a play and are furious because none of the actors we wanted were available and someone else cast all the roles and no one knows their lines but we still have do our job and get the show on the road — for the rest of our life. EVERY DAY.

"The bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other's life."

Richard Bach

If you can live your intentions 90% of the time but immediately lose it when your mother calls, you have work to do! But there is so much to be gained.

Is there a way to find peace, joy and respect in the family you were born into?

We can always of course, choose not to continue any relationship- family or not and should if it is extreme or dangerous, but for most of the time, our close family relationships can become the source of deep insights because this is where we can most readily use our practice. This is also how we can find out who we are-not just in the eyes of our family but how it squares with who we are in our own eyes.

Getting clear on what we want out of family relationships is the first step in dissolving the suffering that may come from it. The disconnection between how you feel and how you want to feel is a place to start.

How? Start with your intention. Let's start with general intentions for your life.

Is your intention in your life to end your suffering and that of others?

Is it to love as much as possible and bring love to the world?

Is it to develop your practice and become enlightened? Don't hold back, what do you want from this life?

What role do you feel your close relationships play in that intention? Do you feel they support you or hold you back? What or who is really holding you back from your peace?

Now let's get specific:

What is it that you want? What does a healthy relationship look like for you?

Enjoyable holiday dinners? Leave feeling confident and loved, not criticized or shut down?

Get specific. Is there a person who you feel is so challenging that it prevents you from experiencing the peace and love you want.

If that person never changed one iota, is it possible to still enjoy time together?

If you have always dreaded being with a family member, are you willing to open to the situation in a new way so you will suffer less?

We cannot change anyone else. Period. We suffer because we want those close to us to be different than who they actually are. We also suffer because we can't control a constantly changing experience that is humans relating with its myriad of countless factors happening all at once. The Buddha said there is no way to know the countless causes and conditions that bring us to where we are, but what we can do is bring that awareness to the present moment, no matter who we are with to set a better course.

When your intentions are right, your actions will be right, and for your intentions to be right the surest way to get there is to have an unshakable resolve.

What is right intention?

This is the 2nd step of the Eightfold Path (right views, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.)

“And what, monks, is right resolve? Resolve for renunciation, resolve for non-ill will, resolve for harmlessness: This, monks, is called right resolve.” The Buddha succinctly sums up the matter when he

says that for a person who holds a wrong view, his deeds, words, plans, and purposes grounded in that view will lead to suffering, while for a person who holds right view, his deeds, words, plans, and purposes grounded in that view will lead to happiness.

Right intention leads to actions that lead to happiness (and not cause suffering in others) = Karma

“If you want to know the past, look at your present. If you want to know the future, look at your present.” <https://fakebuddhaquotes.com/if-you-want-to-know-the-past-look-at-your-present/>

The Buddha points to one of the most distinctive features of his own teaching on karma: that the present experience of pleasure and pain is a combined result of both past and present actions.

The Three Aspects of Right Intention: Renunciation, Loving Kindness, Compassion

I. Renunciation/Letting Go. letting go. versus clinging, desire
Understanding the nature of desire.

It does not mean we don't love or get married or shouldn't have kids or close friends. Real renunciation is not about making ourselves give up things we cherish, but of changing our perspective on them so that they no longer bind us. When we understand the nature of desire, when we investigate it closely with keen attention, desire falls away by itself, without need for struggle. Eugene Cash would say, “The letting go happens by itself.”

Desire: Dalai Lama says: “Detaching does not mean to give up desire. Desire must be there. Without desire, how can we live our life? Without desire, how can we achieve Buddhahood? Strong desire to become Buddha (is helpful); but desire to be harmful, that's bad—but desire of the ego, I, self, itself is nature, and in fact, in order to develop self-confidence and willpower, we need a sense of strong self. It's very necessary in order to tackle all these biological factors of hatred, or anger, these are things [for which] you need tremendous sort of will power. So self-confidence is very, very important, but the ego which disregards other's rights—that is bad. In other words, I think egotistic attitude based on ignorance is negative. Egotistic sort of feelings based on positive reasons is positive.”

Pema Chodron likens renunciation as more of a clearing away, instead taking away, so our basic goodness can shine through.

2. Loving Kindness — good will

We know the difference between good will, vs ill will, we just know it. What are we offering to the world: good will or ill will because it will have results no matter what.

3. Compassion — harmlessness vs. harmfulness

These three aspects of right intention are key to developing positive relationships. But we need to make sure our intention is not confused with goal setting.

II. What Right Intention Is Not -goal setting

Setting intentions is not the same as setting goals.

Goal making is concerned with the future and outcome. As for those good intentions that lead to hell in the old adage, they almost always involve having an agenda for someone else. They are goals disguised as intentions.

Intention is about the now, commitment to your actions and values in the moment —Sila. It is not “set and forget”. But getting more in touch with your intention makes you more effective in reaching goals (that don’t just fulfill ego, desires)

Phillip Moffit: “In choosing to live with right intention, you are not giving up your desire for achievement or a better life or binding yourself to being morally perfect. But you are committing to living each moment with the intention of not causing harm with your actions and words, and not violating others through your livelihood or sexuality. You are connecting to your own sense of kindness and innate dignity. Standing on this ground of intention, you are then able to participate as you choose in life's contests, until you outgrow them.

But right intention is not moral law; it is an attitude or state of mind, which you develop gradually.”
(<http://dharma wisdom.org/teachings/articles/hearts-intention>)

Do a “Sila” (ethics) check. Do your actions line up with your values?

The Dalai Lama once suggested a simple way of checking our motivations, by posing these questions to ourselves:

Is it just for me or for others?

For the benefit of the few or for the many?

For now or for the future?

Finally, give yourself room to not know how to navigate the relationship at all times:

Be open to letting go of the meanings of roles/labels

Be mindful of what your ego says a “good” daughter/mother/father/son/sister/brother etc looks like and see if you are willing to let it become something else more positive and healthy, balancing self-care and care for others.

Dedicate your intention every day.

“I resolve to be enlightened with an unshakable inclination to love above all else and let go.”

Resolving challenging family relationships

Resolving a challenging family relationship requires courage, patience, mindfulness to be aware of the situation in the present, reflection on yourself and the other that is objective and non-judgmental, and a deep resolve to use the three intentions of letting go, loving-kindness, and compassion.

Let a challenging family relationship come to mind and then work through the following:

First, do a **letting go exercise – three questions for you to ponder (be honest and non-judgmental)**

What desires do we cling to in our family relationships that are not being fulfilled?

Some choices:

Having the relationship be as we want it to be

Changing the other person to meet our pictures.

Not being cared for enough

Not being listened to or heard.

Not being appreciated.

Absence of conflict.

Getting our way.

Being respected.

What is it about the other person that causes us to be avoid them?

Some choices:

- Criticism
- Contempt
- Resentment
- Stone walling
- Defensiveness

Is it possible that your responses to the second question might be related to your behaviors that you may unconsciously exhibit yourself? Sometimes what we dislike in others is a mirror to our behavior of which we may be unaware. This is just something to reflect on and investigate through mindfulness.

Next work through the following steps:

- First identify what you think the “problem is”
- Next identify what is realistically possible. Use lessons of the past.
- Pay attention to your body as you ponder these.
Bring breath to any area of discomfort, notice your feelings as they arise and go away. Anger, frustration, sadness.
- Recognize there are reasons someone behaves the way they do even if you don’t know what they are and may never know.
- Use the intention of letting go to note the any attachments that can be let go of. Remember that “the seeing is the doing” (Krishnamurti).
Strive for **Non-attachment** - living from a place of presence, where we honor each relationship experience (including our desires), without grasping or resisting what is occurring. It has the quality of spaciousness and it reflects the ability to live in the present moment.
Note that you are letting go of your “self” as part of the process because the self is the attachment. Losing your definition.
- Offer loving-kindness and compassion to them and yourself.
Giving loving-kindness and compassion
 - Use phrases or just being with the other
 - Phrases
 - Loving Kindness
May you be happy and peaceful
May you be safe and protected
May you be filled with contentment
May you be free from suffering
 - Compassion
May you find safety, even in the midst of pain (or misfortune, difficulties).
May you find peace, even in the midst of pain.
May you find strength, even in the midst of pain.
May you find ease, even in the midst of pain.
- Use the intentions of loving-kindness and compassion to see what you can give to the other. As you reflect and give loving-kindness and compassion, insights will arise on the true nature of the situation. This will let you realize what you can give.
Some options include
 - Appropriate attention

- Respect
- Dignity
- Civility

Dedicate your intention every day.

“I resolve to be enlightened with an unshakable inclination to love above all else and let go.”

“Never let a problem to be solved be more important than a person to be loved.”ⁱ

ⁱ Emily Hoffman, *How to Avoid Getting Angry*