Appropriate Intention

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Sammā saṅkappa — usually translated “right intention” or “right thought” — is the second factor of the Eightfold Path, and it is easily misread. The word saṅkappa carries the sense of resolve, orientation, or purposive inclination: not what we think, but the direction in which thinking and acting are already leaning. Sammā, as with every factor of the path, does not mean “correct as opposed to incorrect.” It means appropriate, fitting, wholesome, suited to conditions. Appropriate Intention is not a rule about what to want; it is an inquiry into the quality of wanting itself.

The Canon presents three kinds of appropriate intention: nekkhamma-saṅkappa, abyāpāda-saṅkappa, and avihiṃsā-saṅkappa — the intentions of letting-be, of non-ill-will, and of non-harmfulness. These are framed negatively on purpose. They are not positive programs to install but directions of release: away from grasping, away from aversion, away from the wish to harm. The movement is from tightening toward opening.

But the Buddha does not stop at removal. Mettā — goodwill or loving-kindness — appears throughout the teachings as something to be actively cultivated, not merely as the absence of its opposite. The Mettā Sutta (Sn 1.8) describes it as a standing orientation toward all beings, extended without exception. Mettā operates at the level of both view and intention. As view, it sees others as full centers of experience deserving of wellbeing. As intention, it inclines the mind toward care rather than indifference. This means Mettā does not require warmth as a precondition. It is less an emotion than an orientation — a direction in which the heart and mind are already leaning. Abyāpāda clears the ground; mettā is what naturally moves into that space.

This matters because intention is not primarily an object of deliberate thought. Most intention operates below conscious reflection, as a kind of leaning already underway — the body already moving before the mind catches up. We discover what we intended mainly by noticing what we did and how it felt afterward. This is why phenomenological attention is not supplementary to practice but central to it: the somatic signature of intention — the quality of contraction or openness in action — is often the earliest available signal about where the mind is actually going.

In the Dvedhāvitakka Sutta (MN 19), the Buddha describes noticing which thoughts arise habitually and recognizing their fruits. Thoughts of sensual desire, ill-will, and harmfulness he compared to fast-growing weeds that quickly overrun a field. What he describes is not suppression but observation followed by re-orientation. The practice is not to stop intending but to see what intending is actually doing, and to discover that with sustained attention, the grip of unskillful intention loosens without force.

Appropriate Intention also connects to what the first factor is doing structurally in the path. Appropriate View comes first: it provides the orientation, the framework that allows us to see clearly. Appropriate Intention comes second: it is the affective and motivational momentum that either supports or undermines that seeing. A clear view not grounded in supportive intention is vulnerable to being overridden by craving or aversion the moment conditions become difficult. Together, view and intention form the axis around which the rest of the path turns.

Reflections

1. Sammā Saṅkappa as Orientation, Not Prescription

The path does not ask us to manufacture pure intentions on demand. It asks us to notice the orientation already present beneath the surface of action — the lean of the mind before deliberation begins. What is the affective quality of a decision before you rationalize it?

> ***Example:*** *Agreeing to help someone while noticing a subtle resentment already present in the body before the words leave your mouth.*

2. Nekkhamma: The Intention of Letting-Be

Nekkhamma is often translated as renunciation, but the root sense is closer to emergence or stepping out — stepping out of the contracted world of craving. It does not require asceticism. Letting-be may be more precise than letting-go: it does not assume a separate self that is doing the releasing, but rather a ceasing to superimpose control over what is already arising. The grip of wanting loosens not because we force it open but because we stop tightening it. What does that quality of non-interference feel like, and what becomes available in it?

> ***Example:*** *Reaching for the phone out of habit, pausing, noticing the pull, and simply not following it — and noticing the brief spaciousness that follows.*

3. Abyāpāda and Mettā: Clearing the Ground, Cultivating Goodwill

Abyāpāda means the non-arising of ill-will or aversion — not the forced production of goodwill, but the ceasing of the wish to push away. This is subtler than it sounds: aversion includes the wish to avoid, to dismiss, to make something or someone simply not be there. Mettā — goodwill — is what becomes available when that contracting movement is no longer running. As view, mettā sees others as full subjects deserving of wellbeing. As intention, it is already leaning toward care before a decision is made. Neither requires the feeling of warmth on demand: both are orientations, not emotional performances.

> ***Example:*** *Sitting with someone who has disappointed you and noticing the aversive pull to withdraw — then finding, when you don't follow it, a residual care that was there beneath the irritation.*

4. Avihiṃsā: The Intention of Non-Harmfulness

Avihiṃsā — non-harmfulness — covers a wider range than cruelty, which implies deliberate intent to cause pain. Most harm in daily life comes from carelessness: inattention to impact, treating another's suffering as a minor inconvenience, using someone's vulnerability as leverage without quite naming it that way. The inquiry is not about guilt but about honest seeing: where does the intention to protect my own comfort quietly override the intention not to harm?

> ***Example:*** *Noticing that you've been winning an argument rather than trying to understand, and that the win has come at the cost of connection — and that this was a choice, even if it wasn't a deliberate one.*

5. The Bodily Feel of Intention

Every intention has a felt quality in the body: grasping has its texture, aversion has its own, equanimity another. The body often registers the quality of an intention before the mind has named it. Meditation practice develops this somatic literacy — not as self-surveillance, but as a way of being present to what is actually moving in us.

> ***Example:*** *Noticing, mid-sentence in a difficult conversation, a tightening in the throat and chest, and recognizing it as the intention to defend rather than to listen.*

6. Intention as a Process, Not an Action

Saṅkappa names the path factor — the directional orientation we bring to experience. Cetanā is the broader Pali term for volition itself: the mental factor present in every moment of consciousness that organizes other mental factors around a purpose. The Buddha's clearest statement on kamma turns on it — "it is cetanā that I call kamma." Saṅkappa is, in a sense, cetanā understood as a path factor: the volitional stream as it can be deliberately oriented. What both terms point to is that intention is not a single choice at the beginning of an action but a process that can shift in the middle. Re-orienting when we notice where we have drifted — that re-orienting is itself the practice.

> ***Example:*** *Starting a difficult email from irritation, noticing it halfway through, and choosing to begin again from a different place — not erasing the irritation, but no longer being steered by it.*

7. The Relationship Between View and Intention

The order of the factors is not arbitrary. Appropriate View provides the perceptual clarity; Appropriate Intention provides the motivational orientation that allows that clarity to bear fruit in action. A view held clearly but without aligned intention is fragile. An intention without the grounding of view may be earnest but misdirected. Together they support each other like two poles of a tent.

> **Example:** *Understanding intellectually that another person's criticism comes from their own fear and conditioning, yet noticing the immediate intention to defend yourself or diminish them in return.*

> **Example:** *Knowing intellectually that winning an argument will not produce lasting satisfaction, while still feeling the intention to keep pushing for victory rather than understanding.*

Discussion Points

Intention and Self-Deception

We are often the last to know our own intentions. The rationalizing mind constructs narratives of virtue around actions whose actual drivers are more mixed. What practices or habits help you notice the gap between stated and actual intention?

- Is it possible to act well from unskillful intention? Does the outcome change the intention retroactively?
- How do we distinguish genuine letting-be from the avoidance that sometimes wears its face?

Intention in Relationships

Much of what passes as help, generosity, or kindness carries embedded intentions that complicate the giving. The three-part framework — letting-be, non-ill-will, non-harmfulness — offers a way to examine the motivational texture of our care.

- Can you think of a time when your helpful action had a controlling or self-serving intention underneath it that you only recognized afterward?
- What is the felt difference between helping from genuine care and helping from obligation, guilt, or the wish to be seen as good?

Practice Without Perfectionism

The path does not require pure intention as a precondition. It requires honest attention to the intentions actually present. Trying to have the right intentions is itself a form of grasping. The practice is to see, not to manufacture.

- How do you hold the aspiration toward appropriate intention without turning it into another standard to fail at?

Group Inquiry

- What does it feel like in the body to act from aligned intention — when what you're doing and why you're doing it are in accord?
- Can you identify a recurring pattern of action whose underlying intention you find uncomfortable to name?
- What is the difference between restraining an unskillful intention and releasing it? Which is more available to you, and under what conditions?
- If cetanā is a stream rather than a single event, when in a recent interaction did you notice the intention shift — and what shifted it?
- The third kind of appropriate intention — avihiṃsā — includes carelessness about suffering, not only active ill-will. Where in daily life is carelessness about harm easiest to overlook?

Appropriate Intention is not a moral checklist. It is the practice of ***attending to what is actually moving in us*** — before, during, and after action — with enough honesty to see it clearly and enough steadiness to re-orient when we have drifted. The aim is not purity but wakefulness.

> *All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. The way that we incline our minds becomes the shape of our lives. If we incline our minds towards greed, ill-will, and delusion, that becomes the shape of our lives; if we incline our minds towards great friendliness and compassion, our lives are shaped by care, friendliness, and compassion.*
>
> **— The Buddha**