

Where Practice Takes Hold: Intention, Action, and Outcome

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The Buddha did not teach us how to control outcomes. He taught us how to understand where suffering is generated and where it is not. Much of our confusion comes from collapsing three different things — intention, action, and outcome — into a single psychological demand, and then suffering when the demand goes unmet.

This is not indifference to the world. It is a recognition of where our practice can take hold. When we see this clearly, we can care deeply and act firmly without insisting that reality conform to us on our timeline.

1. Intention (*Cetanā*): The Ethical and Psychological Root

Intention is the orientation of the mind from which action arises. In the Pali Canon it sits at the very center of *kamma*:

“It is intention that I call kamma.” — Āṅguttara Nikāya 6.63

Intention answers a single question: why am I acting? Practice works with the felt tone underneath that “why” — greed or non-greed, aversion or non-aversion, delusion or clarity. The aim is not to manufacture perfect intentions, but to see them more clearly and become less driven by reactivity.

One clarification matters here, because it is easy to miss: strong intention does not require emotional pressure. Caring deeply about something does not mean demanding a particular outcome. The intensity of our care and our grip on results are two separate things.

2. Action (*Kamma*): What We Actually Do

The Buddha often uses *kamma* primarily for intention — the volition from which action arises. But in ordinary discussion we also use it for the action that expresses that intention through body, speech, and mind. Both senses point to the same process. This section focuses on the outward expression.

Action is where responsibility lives. The Buddha’s concern was speech, bodily conduct, and livelihood — the domain of effort, discipline, and choice. We act according to our values, our understanding, and the conditions actually available to us.

A common confusion is to read non-attachment as not acting strongly. The Buddha never taught passivity. He taught acting without clinging to the result. You can work to reduce suffering, oppose harm, and speak clearly and firmly — all without demanding that the world comply on your schedule.

3. Outcome (*Vipāka*): What Happens Next

Outcomes are not fully ours to control. They depend on other people, on systems and history, on the environment, on biology, and on chance. Psychological suffering arises in a predictable way: when we demand a specific outcome, when we collapse genuine moral concern into emotional insistence, and when we confuse care with control.

It helps to separate two stances that look similar but operate very differently:

Stance	What it sounds like
Preference	“I strongly want this outcome and will work toward it.”
Demand	“This must happen or I cannot be at peace.”

The difference is *attachment to result* — not moral seriousness. A preference can be held with full conviction. A demand quietly makes our peace of mind hostage to events we do not govern.

For example, a parent spends years helping an adult child who continues making destructive choices. The intention is love and concern. The action is setting boundaries, offering help, and speaking honestly. The outcome, however, belongs mainly to another person. The practice is not giving up on the child; it is recognizing that caring deeply does not give us control over another person’s life.

Or: you apologize sincerely after hurting someone. Your intention is to repair the relationship, and your action is honest acknowledgment. But the other person may not forgive you. Practice means accepting that forgiveness is not yours to command.

4. Where Practice Takes Hold

Practice takes hold:

- **before action** — in intention,
- **during action** — in effort and awareness,
- **after action** — in our relationship to the outcome.

It finds no hold in controlling results. It finds none in replaying what should have happened, or in insisting that reality conform to our wishes.

5. Working at Each Entry Point

These three locations are not a modern overlay. In the *Ambalaṭṭhikā-Rāhulovāda Sutta* (MN 61) the Buddha tells his son Rāhula to examine each action of body, speech, and mind before acting, while acting, and after acting — each time asking whether it leads to the affliction of oneself, of others, or of both. He gives the image of a mirror: a mirror is for reflecting. Practice has the same three moments, and each is a place we can intervene.

Before Action — Intention

The intervention is a single beat in which we check the tone of a motive before it becomes a deed. You are about to answer a message that landed wrong, and the pull is to fire back. The entry point is one breath in which you ask which root is driving: is this clarity, or is aversion looking for a way out of the body? Usually the bare noticing is enough — the reply you actually send is not the one aversion wanted to send. Nothing has been suppressed; the root has changed, and the action changes with it.

During Action — Effort and Awareness

Here the action is already underway and we steer it from inside. Mid-conversation you feel the body tighten — the jaw, the breath going shallow, the urge to win rather than to understand. That signal is the entry point: the feeling-tone (*vedanā*) caught before it hardens into a reactive sentence. Noticing it lets you slow the pace, soften, and ask a question instead of landing a point. It is the same move as the walking instruction below — notice the drift, return — applied to conduct.

After Action — Relationship to Outcome

Two situations live here. When the outcome was never ours to control, the entry point is declining the second arrow: you did the work, the result went another way, and you refuse to make your steadiness hostage to a verdict you did not govern. When the conduct was ours, the entry point is honest review — did this cause harm? If so, you acknowledge it cleanly, repair what you can, and resolve to act differently. This is the part most often gotten wrong: self-punishment feels like accountability but changes no future behavior, while clean acknowledgment does. Rāhula's after-action reflection has exactly this tone — corrective, not punishing.

At every entry point, the move is the same: *see the process, do not fight the result*. What changes is only where in the arc we happen to be standing. If you can see the pull toward a particular outcome, you no longer have to be driven by it.

6. Walking Meditation as a Lived Example

Walking meditation puts the whole structure in one short loop. Intention: to walk attentively. Action: walking. Outcome: sometimes the mind stays, sometimes it wanders. We do not get to dictate which.

Simple Instructions

- Use a short path, about 12 to 15 feet.
- Walk naturally, at an unforced pace.
- Let the anchor be the contact of the feet with the ground.
- When thinking carries you off, stop.
- When the mind settles, begin walking again.

What this demonstrates is the practice in miniature: no demanding that the mind behave, no forcing of outcomes — just responsiveness in place of control. The action continues without the psychological pressure. The change is not yours to make, but the conditions are.

7. Reflection Questions for Discussion

- Where do I confuse caring with demanding?
- Does a preference feel different than a demand?
- How often do I punish myself for outcomes I don't control?
- What changes when I separate intention from outcome?
- Can I act fully without insisting that the result validate me?
- Can I remember a recent situation where I did the right thing but did not get the result I wanted?

Closing

The Buddha's teaching is not about changing the world first. It is about changing our relationship to experience, so that action arises from clarity rather than reactivity.

Clear intention + ethical action + non-clinging to outcome = less suffering, more steadiness, and clearer judgment.