

Dear Friends,

Here are the referenced handouts and writing prompts for “What’s Your Story?”

Enjoy!

Mark

Week One:

http://contemplativejournal.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=107

Writing Prompts Week One

1. Do you believe that your self-image is a case of mistaken identity? Who or why not?
2. Are you aware of a larger Self that is not circumscribed by the self you project in the world? Why or why not?
3. Do you believe that you are your body? Or that you have a body?
4. Do you think of your body a subject or an object?
5. Do you believe that the body itself can be enlightened? (That the physical form can "wake up," as suggested by teachers like Sri Aurobindo)? Or is the body a lower life form, a necessary evil, a hindrance, a beast of burden?
6. Is your attitude toward the body (and carnal life generally) linked to notions of sin and mortification, or the sense of being a "fallen" creature?
7. Do you experience your body as a mortal coil, tying you to the suffering earth, or as a telescope to higher consciousness?

8. How does your identification with the body (or psychological split from it) reflect your feeling and beliefs about death?
9. Relating to question 8, do you use spiritual life as a path of reunion with nature? Or is your faith a shield against animal life and the body with its inconvenient desires and fragility?
10. Do you believe that you are your mind? Or do you have a mind?
11. When thought contradicts feeling, which do you trust?
12. Do you privilege reason over intuition?
13. Is your self-image the same as your identity?
14. Does truth require the mind in order to exist?
15. Are you aware of your body's intelligence? Or do you believe, along with Descartes, that thinking constitutes your essence?
16. What are the primary identifying labels of your personal identity? (Jewish, female, American, etc.)
17. Is your self-image a source of empowerment or limitation (which parts empower, which parts limit)?
18. How does your story contradict the truth of who you are?
19. Are you able to be adaptive and fluid in response to change, or do you hold to your own self-image -- those aspects of your "normal life" considered indispensable to your identity -- with monolithic rigidity?
20. How is your self-image distorted by neurosis, trauma, fear?
21. Are you able to access witness consciousness? How do you do this? Who can't you do this? And what changes in your mind-body-spirit when this happens?

22. Does The Witness reveal things to you that your mind misses?
23. What is your most effective way of connecting with The Witness?
24. What is The Witness reflecting to you -- right now, at this very moment -- that you need to see?
25. Are you someone who needs to be busy? Do you define yourself by what you do?
26. Do you push when you'd like to pause, or pause when you'd prefer to push?
27. How do you define success?
28. Where do you need to bring balance into your habits and orientation?
29. Do you feel worthy simply *being*? Or must you be on a path of progress in order to feel that your life is worthwhile?

Week Two:

Excerpts from

Illuminating the Shadow:

An Interview with Connie Zweig

By Scott London



Scott London: Of all the metaphors that have been used to illustrate the shadow in recent years, my favorite is Robert Bly's image of the big bag we drag behind us.

Connie Zweig: Yes, he said that we spend the first half of our lives putting everything into the bag and the second half pulling it out.

London: What did Carl Jung have in mind when he formulated this idea?

Zweig: He believed that everything that is in our conscious awareness is in the light. But everything of substance which stands in the light — whether it's a tree or an idea — also casts a shadow. And that which stands in the darkness is outside of our awareness. As Jung saw it, the shadow operated at several levels. First, there is the part of the mind that is outside of our awareness. He called this the personal unconscious or personal shadow. That is the conditioned part of us that we acquire from our experiences in our childhood when that which is unacceptable, as determined by the adults around us, is cast into shadow. It may be sadness or sexual curiosity. Or it may be our creative dreams and desires. That's personal shadow. But there is another level as well. Jung also talked about the "collective unconscious" or the "archetypal shadow."

I would say the personal shadow is that part of us that feels like it can't be tamed, can't be controlled. For instance, many parents who struggle with their children with impulses of rage that rise up, and they yell, or maybe even hit the child. Then, afterwards, they say to themselves, "Oh, my God, I can't believe I did that. Who am I?" That's the shadow.

London: There have been a spate of books and conferences about the shadow in recent years. Why do you think this subject has become so popular now?

Zweig: In some ways our collective denial has broken down. I think that has been happening gradually since the 1960s. We've lost faith in politicians. We watch them enact their own shadows in the headlines everyday. And we have lost faith, to some extent, in celebrity heroes

because we read about their failings and double-lives everyday in the news. I also think that a lot of people in the New Age or counter-culture — people who have been really involved in spirituality and Eastern philosophy — have had experiences in which either their teachers or their communities broke their hearts in some way. And on a larger scale, there are so many topics that were in the cultural shadow which are now out in the light. For example, domestic violence, childhood sexual abuse, alcoholism in epidemic proportions. These are topics that would not have been commonly spoken about 20 years ago and are now understood by everyone.

London: Do these things all fall under the rubric of the shadow?

Zweig: These issues were in the collective shadow, they were taboo, forbidden topics, areas we didn't want to look at. In terms of individuals, anything that is unacceptable to us, anything that's hidden or denied — what we want to hide from, what we don't want to know about ourselves — that's the shadow. So I'm making the analogy to the culture.

London: I would imagine that many of us are unaware of our shadows and only encounter them through other people, in the form of projections.

Zweig: That's right. By definition, the nature of the shadow is to hide. It hides outside the boundaries of awareness. Then it erupts spontaneously. It may erupt in an addiction, for example. But if it erupts in a projection, as you mentioned, you may have the experience of walking into a party, seeing a perfect stranger, and saying to yourself, "I can't stand that woman! How could she behave that way?" That is your shadow speaking. There is a message there from a hidden part of yourself. There is information about your own psyche in that moment which, if you don't begin to explore it, is like a letter that has been left unopened — you lose the message there. But if you begin to do shadow work and ask yourself, "What is it about

that person I can't stand, that is so unacceptable to me?" you will get the message.

London: Do children have shadows?

Zweig: It's natural and inevitable to form a shadow as a child. It develops in tandem with the more conscious side of the personality. The conscious and the unconscious, the light side and the dark side, develop together as we develop in our families and schools and churches, as we learn what is acceptable and what is not acceptable.

London: In your experience, do some people cast bigger shadows than others?

Zweig: It's certainly evident that some people have more destructive shadow material and are more prone to acting it out. Obviously, a serial murderer is not the same as someone who yells at her child. Certain people have much deeper and more intractable psychological disorders than others.

London: There is an arresting phrase in your book *Meeting the Shadow*. You write: "As repugnant as the idea may seem, we need enemies."

Zweig: I remember when the Cold War ended, how quickly the United States was swept by a nationalistic fervor and turned against Saddam Hussein. As soon as we lost our age-old enemy, the Soviet Union, we instantly created a new one. There is an enemy-maker in each of us. We make enemies of the people we love the most and the people we know the least. We talked earlier about projection. There is a part of us that attributes to groups an us-and-them quality. They are unacceptable because they are not wealthy or they are not educated or they are not the right color or whatever it is. This is an aspect of the shadow erupts and turns people into the other, into the enemy.

You may have experienced that in your own relationships: when you look at the person you feel the closest to, the most intimate with, and suddenly he or she is a stranger. He or she may even be repulsive. Someone said to me recently, "He is so attracted to his wife, but every once in a while he looks at her and she looks ugly to him." In those moments, we create a stranger. Our shadow turns the beloved into the enemy.

London: Does the shadow have any redeeming qualities?

Zweig: Yes. One of Carl Jung's real contributions, I think, was to point out that the shadow contains all sorts of creative, positive content. If you were a musically gifted child, for instance, and you dreamed about playing guitar or composing a symphony but your parents felt that they wanted you to perform academically and go to law school and join the family law firm, your musical ability went into the shadow. Perhaps at midlife, you have a drastic emergence of a fantasy of playing music. Some people who are taken over by that creative shadow at midlife may leave their marriages. They may leave their careers.

A man I met recently cried as I told this story in a workshop. He is an architect, 45, and all he wants to do is paint. He is remembering now, in very strong imagery and feelings, that when he was young he wanted to paint and draw, but nobody allowed him to. So he wants to leave his profession and stay home and paint.

So despite the popular conception of the shadow as dark or negative, there are incredible potentials, gifts and talents lying dormant there as well.

London: Midlife seems to be a crucial turning point for many people. In the opening line of your book *Meeting the Shadow*, you said that you met your devils at midlife.

Zweig: For me midlife was a turning to face those parts of myself that I hadn't been willing to look at before. And I hadn't been willing in part because they were outside of awareness. But also, I hadn't been willing because I wasn't ready. I think I didn't have the will, the desire, until then. Then, when I turned 40, something changed. It's different for every individual at midlife. For some of us, the devils can be a history of abuses or addictions that we were unwilling to face. For other people, the devils can be patterns of destructive behavior — let's say, workaholism, or destructive relationships.

London: Carl Jung said that he never let anyone into analysis before midlife.

Zweig: Yes. In many of the ancient, mystical traditions that involve initiatory processes, a person was not allowed to enter until midlife. He or she didn't have a stable outer family life established to be grounded in, or a stable internal ego structure to tolerate what comes up when you face shadow material. All of those ancient spiritual traditions knew that at some point you meet the demons on the path. It was understood that meeting the shadow was an integral part of religious and spiritual teaching. But contemporary New Age teachings split it off and basically say that everything is goodness and light, and we can transcend all that dark stuff.

London: I remember a conversation I had with the writer Phil Cousineau. He distinguished between spirit and soul. Spirit is in the heights, he said, while soul is in the depths. While we tend reach for the heights, it's usually in the depths that we find that sense of aliveness. As he put it, "You don't tell Aretha Franklin to 'Get up,' you tell her to 'get *down*.'" [Laughs]

Zweig: Yes. I think that what has happened in our eagerness to be more spiritual, more conscious, more aware, is that we've only gone up. And some of us have been left floating up there in the skies, just over the mountain tops, like helium-balloons. We've lost the contact with the lower worlds, with the passions, the instincts, sex, desire.

We've made desire wrong and have wanted to be free of our attachments and our cravings, as the Buddha teaches.

London: This may have something to do with our Judeo-Christian heritage which teaches us that our lower half represents original sin, unworthiness, and all our evil impulses?

Zweig: Yes. The traditional purpose of religion is to teach us the difference between the dark side and the light side, what is moral and what is immoral behavior. In the Judao-Christian tradition, those sides are very cut off from one another. So we have God and the Devil and never the twain shall meet. But in many other cultures, that is not the case.

I spent time in Bali a number of years ago, which is a Hindu culture. Over every doorway there are masks of demons to greet you, as if to say: "The shadow lives here, it's part of our life, it's part of our home." That is very different from a Judeo-Christian orientation, which says: "Banish the demons. Keep them as far away as possible. Don't let them in the doorway."

London: You say that we must learn to "romance" the shadow.

Zweig: Yes, what my co-author Steve Wolf and I mean by romancing the shadow is this: if you can begin to coax it out of hiding, almost seduce it like a shy lover, then you can begin to make a more conscious relationship to your own shadow. The more the shadow hides, the more it's outside awareness, the tighter its hold over us.

London: We've heard a number of variations of this phrase in recent years — "embracing the shadow," "befriending the shadow" and so on.

Zweig: Well, It doesn't feel like a friend. It feels like a damn opposition. [Laughs] In the 70s and 80s, people used terms like "integrating" the shadow, and "embracing" the shadow. My sense of it was that it was as if the shadow material could be taken on by the

ego, could be synthesized somehow, eaten. We used to say "eating the shadow."

London: A friend of mine who has been wrestling with his shadow for some time quipped that the title of your book, *Romancing the Shadow*, misses the point. "Forget about romancing it," he said, "I want to *annihilate* it!" [Laughs]

Zweig: I really don't think the point is to get rid of the shadow. The point is not to eliminate the unconscious. The point is to become increasingly aware of what we call the shadow-characters — those aspects of the unconscious that are erupting and leading us to destructive or self-destructive behaviors. So the goal is not to get rid of it, but as Robert Bly would say, to begin to take the material out of the bag. Carl Jung used to talk about "holding the tension of the opposites" as a basis for working with the shadow. But if you've ever tried that in your own life, you know how hard it is. If you can hold the tension of opposite points of view in your intimate relationships with people, instead of making somebody right and somebody wrong, you are really taking an evolutionary step.

London: Jung said that we don't conquer our problems, we outgrow them. Can we outgrow our shadow?

Zweig: If you begin to do shadow-work and uncover the character that is hiding there, and see what it's needing, what it's saying to you, what you feel the moment it comes up, you have a way to relate to it. It loses its compelling quality and doesn't drive you so much. As it recedes, you can again hear the voice of the self, the voice of your own intuitive wisdom, the part of you that knows what is right action. Carl Jung used to say that if we can shed a little light on our own darkness, it will remove some of the larger darkness from the world.

A Secret Life
By Stephen Dunn

Why you need to have one
is not much more mysterious than
why you don't say what you think
at the birth of an ugly baby.
Or, you've just made love
and feel you'd rather have been
in a dark booth where your partner
was nodding, whispering yes, yes,
you're brilliant. The secret life
begins early, is kept alive
by all that's unpopular
in you, all that you know
a Baptist, say, or some other
accountant would object to.
It becomes what you'd most protect
if the government said you can protect
one thing, all else is ours.
When you write late at night
it's like a small fire
in a clearing, it's what
radiates and what can hurt
if you get too close to it.
It's why your silence is a kind of truth.
Even when you speak to your best friend,
the one who'll never betray you,
you always leave out one thing;
a secret life is that important.

Week Three:

Each of us contains a primordial landscape filled with unbounded potential. This is where the wild things are: your unbridled appetites, natural gifts, and unfettered powers of personal genius. Your deepest wisdom and happiness are found here as well.

The lifeblood of this creative landscape is desire. Desire is the vital force that through the green fuse drives the flower. Desire carries the seeds of invention, nourishes the roots of transformation, and enables us to bring forth our unique vision. Many of us never acknowledge the full force of our own desires nor the life-changing wisdom they carry: about who we are, who we're not, and what our purpose may be in this lifetime. We may be ambivalent toward our own desires. As two-brained creatures torn between reason and emotion, logic and instinct, we may be divided against our most basic impulses. We long to be free yet reject our own freedom. We crave individuality and social acceptance with equal fervor. We love to discover, explore, and reveal, yet cling to the comforts and limits of the familiar.

In light of our dualistic nature, it's hardly a surprise that desire confounds us. Desire can be anarchic and fierce, threatening the established order. Desire, particularly in the form of passion, often lays waste to our best made plans, revealing aspects of our personal nature that make no rational sense whatsoever (but remain indisputably true). As we enter the world of our own desires, logic is frequently turned upside down, making way for vivid insight and paths we never planned to follow. It may be difficult to navigate this creative wilderness at first. Having learned to be respectable grown-ups, to beat down our wanton urges, color between the lines, and keep our social Spanx in place (to hide unsightly creative bulges), we're called upon to train ourselves in surrender, self-trust, and obedience to mystery. The more we learn to tell the truth about our own desires, the less scared we become. As fear subsides, passion will rise, bringing the power of genius with it.

Writing Prompts for Week Three

1. What recurring creative impulses do you fear, deny, judge, or reject?
2. Are you aware of ambivalence as a hindrance to your life? In what areas? Where does this ambivalence stem from?

3. What would you change in your life today if time, money, and/or social stigma were not issues?
4. Where do you need more courage in your life?
5. What is your relationship to surrender?
6. What burning passions drive you? These may be positive passions or destructive passions.
7. Is it difficult for you to exercise discernment in the grip of desire? What particular desire(s)?
8. What is the relationship between faith and fear? What about faith and desire?
9. How do you feel about freedom? Be truthful. Where does freedom appeal to and where do you avoid it?
10. Are you moralistic towards your own impulses when they fall outside of the status quo? If so, when and why?

Week Four:

The Quest for Meaning

“What I really need is to get clear about what I must do, not what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must precede every act. What matters is to find a purpose, to see what it really is that God wills that I shall do; the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die.” -- Soren Kierkegaard

1. Notice Kierkegaard's clear distinction between what we must **do** versus what we must **know**.
2. Also, his phrase **truth for me**.
3. Finally, consider his suggestion that it is an **idea** for which one is willing to live and die that brings coherence to existence.

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Many of you are familiar with Viktor Frankl's classic *Man's Search For Meaning*, which records the Austrian psychiatrist-neurologist's experiences in the Auschwitz death camp during WWII. During his incarceration, Frankl came to the wisdom that became the basis for what he called logotherapy. Like Kierkegaard's "will to meaning," logotherapy is founded upon the belief that it is the striving to find a **meaning** in one's life, as opposed to **pleasure** (Freud) or power (**Nietzsche**), which is the most powerful motivating force in humans.

According to Frankl, "Life has meaning under all circumstances, even the most miserable ones."

Logotherapy's two central tenets are that:

1. Our **main motivation for living** is our will to find meaning in life
2. We have inalienable **freedom** to find meaning

We can find meaning, Frankl taught, in life in three different ways:

1. By **creating** a work or doing a deed
2. By **experiencing** something or encountering someone.
3. By the **attitude** we take toward unavoidable suffering.

#

Finally, David Whyte's big idea about the **conversational nature of reality** is provocative and useful. In brief, Whyte is saying that everything in nature is in conversation with something else. The bee is in conversation with the

flower. The child is in conversation with the mother. The job you do is in conversation with your community. And so on. It is this conversational quality of life that gives it meaning. Where do “who you are” and “what you do” meet the needs of the world around you? That interface is where meaning happens, Whyte suggests. Unless we are in conversation, we are in monologue (something that doesn’t exist in nature). Whyte is especially astute when applying the conversational nature of reality to work. He writes:

“Through work, human beings earn for themselves and their families, make a difficult world habitable, and with imagination, create some meaning from what they do and how they do it. The human approach to work can be naïve, fatalistic, power-mad, money-grubbing, unenthusiastic, cynical, detached and obsessive. It can also be selflessly mature, revelatory and life giving; mature in its long-reaching effects, and life giving in the way it gives back to an individual or society as much as it has taken. Almost always it is both, a sky full of light and dark, with all the varied weather of an individual life blowing through it.” – from *Crossing the Unknown Sea*

Writing Prompts for Week Four

1. What is it about your current life that gives you the deepest, most abiding sense of meaning? Why is this so?
2. Are there elements in your current life that once held meaning for you but no longer do? When and why did this change?
3. Make a list of the *shoulds* (at least ten items) that dominate your life. For example, “I should do more yoga.” “I shouldn’t be jealous of my husband’s secretary.” “I should find work that matters to me.” After the list is complete, go through it item by item and write about your true feelings regarding this supposed *should*. Be as truthful as possible.
4. What is your relationship to choice? Are you a decisive person? Do you tend to go with the flow? Are there areas of your life where choosing more carefully, or truthfully, would instill your life with more meaning?

5. What is your relationship to control? Are you a controlling person? Is it easy for you to surrender? Is there a link, for you, between surrender and freedom? Freedom and meaning?
6. When it comes to making sense of your life, do you rely more heavily on emotional sense or rational sense? This relates to how you approach choice-making as well. Do you operate more from the gut or the head?
7. What part does love (and loving) play in your sense of personal meaning? What relationships in your life give you the deepest sense of purpose and personal worth?
8. What part do faith, spirituality, and truth seeking play in your sense of personal meaning?
9. What do you hold sacred in your life? How do you define sacredness? What is the relationship between sacredness and meaning?
10. When you look at your life in terms of “conversational reality,” where do your work, passion, and aspirations intersect with the greater good and/or the needs of your community? If there is no visible interface, why is this? How can you forge a stronger link between what you care about and the needs of others?

Week Five:

Writing Prompts For Week Five

1. What did you learn about love from your mother (or primary caretaker)? Do you remember your mother’s gaze? What messages did this gaze communicate to you?

2. Do you tend to cling in love relationships? Or do you have trouble with commitment?
3. Is self-love a challenge for you? Why or why not?
4. Did your early experience of being touched, or not touched, by your primary caretakers affect your ability to show physical affection? In what way(s)? Do these tendencies affect your sexual relationship(s)?
5. Do you believe that spiritual love is possible in ordinary relationships? What does this look like to you?
6. What are your greatest fears about loving?
7. What is the relationship between love and forgiveness in your life?
8. Do you recognize the role of surrender in learning to love? Does surrender come naturally to you? Or is it an uphill battle?
9. What or whom do you love above all else in your life?
10. Do you believe that sacrifice is necessary to loving? If so, why? If not, why not?

Week Six:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-matousek/genius-and-creativity-_b_3824245.html

The Heart's Intention



SETTING INTENTIONS IS NOT THE SAME AS MAKING GOALS.
UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE CAN LEAD TO MORE SKILLFUL LIVING
AND LESS SUFFERING.

Once a month, an hour before the Sunday-evening meditation class I teach, I offer a group interview for students who attend regularly. These interviews give them the opportunity to ask questions about their meditation practice or about applying the dharma to daily life. In a recent session, a yogi who dutifully meditates every morning admitted, "I must be confused about the Buddha's teaching on right intention. I'm very good about setting intentions and then reminding myself of them. But things don't ever seem to turn out according to those intentions, and I fall into disappointment.

At first, I could only smile in response. What a good question! When I asked her to explain these intentions, she proceeded to describe a number of goals for her future - to become less tense at work, to spend more time with her family, to stabilize her finances, and more. She was suffering from a kind of confusion that seems to afflict many bright, hardworking people: mixing up two different life functions that are easily mistaken for each other. All of her goals were laudable, but none would fit within the Buddha's teachings on right intention.

GOALS VS. INTENTIONS

Goal making is a valuable skill; it involves envisioning a future outcome in the world or in your behavior, then planning, applying discipline, and working hard to achieve it. You organize your time and energy based on your goals; they help provide direction for your life. Committing to and visualizing those goals may assist you in your efforts, but neither of these activities is what I call setting intention. They both involve living in an imagined future and are not concerned with what is happening to you in the present moment. With goals, the future is always the focus: Are you going to reach the goal? Will you be happy when you do? What's next?

Setting intention, at least according to Buddhist teachings, is quite different than goal making. It is not oriented toward a future outcome. Instead, it is a path or practice that is focused on how you are "being" in the present moment. Your attention is on the everpresent "now" in the constantly changing flow of life. You set your intentions based on understanding what matters most to you and make a commitment to align your worldly actions with your inner values.

As you gain insight through meditation, wise reflection, and moral living, your ability to act from your intentions blossoms. It is called a practice because it is an ever-renewing process. You don't just set your intentions and then forget about them; you live them every day.

Although the student thought she was focusing on her inner experience of the present moment, she was actually focusing on a future outcome; even though she had healthy goals that pointed in a wholesome direction, she was not being her values. Thus, when her efforts did not go well, she got lost in disappointment and confusion. When this happened, she had no "ground of intention" to help her regain her mental footing - no way to establish herself in a context that was larger and more meaningful than her goal-oriented activity.

Goals help you make your place in the world and be an effective person. But being grounded in intention is what provides integrity and unity in your life. Through the skillful cultivation of intention, you learn to make wise goals and then to work hard toward achieving them without getting caught in attachment to outcome. As I suggested to the yogi, only by remembering your intentions can you reconnect with yourself during those emotional storms that cause you to lose touch with yourself. This remembering is a blessing, because it provides a sense of meaning in your life that is independent of whether you achieve certain goals or not.

Ironically, by being in touch with and acting from your true intentions, you become more effective in reaching your goals than when you act from wants and insecurities. Once the yogi understood this, she started to work with goals and intentions as separate functions. She later reported that continually coming back to her intentions in the course of her day was actually helping her with her goals.

Doing the Groundwork

What would it be like if you didn't measure the success of your life just by what you get and don't get, but gave equal or greater priority to how aligned you are with your deepest values? Goals are rooted in maya (illusion) - the illusory world where what you want seems fixed and unchanging but in truth is forever changing. It is in this world that mara, the inner voice of temptation and discouragement, flourishes. Goals never fulfill you in an ongoing way; they either beget another goal or else collapse. They provide excitement - the ups and downs of life - but intention is what provides you with self-respect and peace of mind.

Cultivating right intention does not mean you abandon goals. You continue to use them, but they exist within a larger context of meaning that offers the possibility of peace beyond the fluctuations caused by pain and pleasure, gain and loss.

The Buddha's Fourth Noble Truth teaches right intention as the second step in the eightfold path: Cause no harm, and treat yourself and others with Loving-kindness and compassion while seeking true happiness, that which comes from being free from grasping and clinging. Such a statement may sound naive or idealistic - a way for nuns and monks to live but not suitable for those of us who must make our way in this tough, competitive world. But to think this is to make the same error as the woman in my group interview.

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.

Naturally, sometimes things go well for you and other times not, but you do not live and die by these endless fluctuations. Your happiness comes from the strength of your internal experience of intention. You become one of those fortunate human beings who know who they are and are independent of our culture's obsession with winning. You still feel sadness, loss, lust, and fear, but you have a means for directly relating to all of these difficult emotions. Therefore, you are not a victim, nor are your happiness and peace of mind dependent on how things are right now.

Misusing Good Intentions

When I offer teachings on right intention, students often ask two things: "Isn't this like signing up for the Ten Commandments in another form?" and "What about the old saying 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions'?" First, the Ten Commandments are excellent moral guidelines for us all, but right intention is not moral law; it is an attitude or state of mind, which you develop gradually. As such, the longer you work with right intention, the subtler and more interesting it becomes as a practice.

In Buddhist psychology, intention manifests itself as "volition," which is the mental factor that most determines your consciousness in each moment. Literally, it is your intention that affects how you interpret what comes into your mind.

Take, for example, someone who is being rude and domineering during a meeting at work. He is unpleasant, or at least your experience of him is unpleasant. What do you notice? Do you see his insecurity and how desperately hungry he is for control and attention? Or do you notice only your own needs and dislike, and take his behavior personally, even though it really has little to do with you? If you are grounded in your intention, then your response will be to notice his discomfort and your own suffering and feel compassion toward both of you. This doesn't mean that you don't feel irritation or that you allow him to push you around, but you avoid getting lost in judgment or personal reaction. Can you feel the extra emotional space such an orientation to life provides? Do you see the greater range of options for interpreting the difficulties in your life?

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, and you abandon your inner intentions in pursuit of them. Moreover, those goals are often only your view of how things are supposed to be, and you become caught in your own reactive mind.

Mixing Motives

One issue around cultivating intention that trips up many yogis is mixed motives. During individual interviews with me, people will sometimes confess their anguish at discovering during meditating how mixed their motives were in past situations involving a friend or a family member. They feel as though they're not a good person and they aren't trustworthy. Sometimes my response is to paraphrase the old blues refrain "If it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all." It is the same with motives; in most situations, if you didn't go with your mixed motives, you wouldn't have any motivation at all. You would just be stuck.

The Buddha knew all about mixed motives. In the Majjhima Nikaya sutta "The Dog-Duty Ascetic," he describes how "dark intentions lead to dark results" and "bright intentions lead to bright results." Then he says, "Bright and dark intentions lead to bright and dark results." Life is like this, which is why we practice. You are not a fully enlightened being; therefore, expecting yourself to be perfect is a form of delusion.

Forget judging yourself, and just work with the arising moment. Right intention is a continual aspiration. Seeing your mixed motives is one step toward liberation from ignorance and from being blinded by either desire or aversion. So welcome such a realization, even though it is painful. The less judgment you have toward yourself about your own mixed motives, the more clearly you can see how they cause suffering. This insight is what releases the dark motives and allows room for bright ones.

Sowing Karmic Seeds

For some people, the most difficult aspect of right intention has to do with the role it plays in the formation of karma. The Buddha classified karma as one of the "imponderables," meaning we can never fully understand it; attempting to do so is not fruitful. Yet we are challenged to work with the truth that every action has both a cause and a consequence.

The primary factor that determines karma is intention; therefore, practicing right intention is crucial to gaining peace and happiness. In Buddhist teachings, karma refers to "the seed from action." This means that any word or action is either wholesome or unwholesome and automatically plants a seed of future occurrence that will blossom on its own accord when the conditions are correct, just as a plant grows when there is the right balance of sunshine, water, and nutrients.

Whether an action is wholesome or unwholesome is determined by the intention that originated it. On reflection, this is common sense. The example often given is that of a knife in the hands of a surgeon versus those of an assailant. Each might use a knife to cut you, but one has the intention to help you heal, while the other has the intention to harm you. Yet you could die from the actions of either. Intention is the decisive factor that differentiates the two. In this view, you are well served by cultivating right intention.

When I'm teaching right intention, I like to refer to it as the heart's intention. Life is so confusing and emotionally confounding that the rational mind is unable to provide an absolutely clear intention. What we have to rely on is our intuitive knowing, or "felt wisdom." In the Buddha's time, this was referred to as bodhichitta, "the awakened mind-heart."

It is said that a karmic seed may bloom at one of three times: immediately, later in this lifetime, or in a future life. Conversely, what is happening to you at each moment is the result of seeds planted in a past life, earlier in this life, or in the previous moment. Whatever your feelings about past lives, the latter two are cause-and-effect phenomena that you recognize as true. But here is a thought to reflect on that is seldom mentioned: Whatever is manifesting itself in your life right now is affected by how you receive it, and how you receive it is largely determined by your intention in this moment.

Imagine that you will have a difficult interaction later today. If you are not mindful of your intention, you might respond to the situation with a harmful physical action - maybe because you got caught in your fear, panic, greed, or ill will. But with awareness of your intention, you would refrain from responding physically. Instead, you might only say something unskillful, causing much less harm. Or if you have a habit of speaking harshly, with right intention you might only have a negative thought but find the ability to refrain from uttering words you would later regret. When you're grounded in your intention, you are never helpless in how you react to any event in your life. While it is true that you often cannot control what happens to you, with mindfulness of intention you can mitigate the effects of what occurs in terms of both the moment itself and what kind of karmic seed you plant for the future.

Developing Resolve

Buddhist teachings suggest that there are certain characteristics called paramis, or perfections, you must develop before you can ever achieve liberation. One of these qualities, right resolve, has to do with developing the will to live by your intentions. Through practicing right resolve, you learn to set your mind to maintaining your values and priorities, and to resist the temptation to sacrifice your values for material or ego gain. You gain the ability to consistently hold your intentions, no matter what arises.

Right intention is like muscle - you develop it over time by exercising it. When you lose it, you just start over again. There's no need to judge yourself or quit when you fail to live by your intentions. You are developing the habit of right intention so that it becomes an unconscious way of living - an automatic response to all situations. Right intention is organic; it thrives when cultivated and wilts when neglected.

Not long ago, the yogi gave me an update on her efforts to practice right intention. She said that for several years, she had pushed and pulled in her relationship, getting irritated with her partner for not spending more time with the family and demanding that he change. One day in meditation, she realized that this was just another example of her getting caught in wanting more. In truth, there was nothing intrinsically wrong with his behavior. It was just that she wanted to spend more time together than he did. She immediately stopped making demands and was much happier.

Soon after this first realization, she found herself in a situation at work where all of her insecurities were ignited. She was in a meeting during which an action was being proposed that she felt was unfair, and she sensed anger rising in her. But before speaking, she left the room to reflect.

When she returned, she was grounded in her intentions to be nonreactive, to seek out clear understanding, and to not be attached to the outcome. This allowed her to participate in the meeting in a calm, effective manner, saying her truth. Surprisingly, the group came to a conclusion that, although it was not what she thought should happen, was at least something she could live with. "Sometimes I remember to work with my intentions," she told me, "but then at other times, I just seem to develop amnesia and completely forget the whole idea for weeks at a time. It's like I had never been exposed to the teaching. I mean, there is nothing in my mind but my goals. I don't even consider my intention." I assured her that it is like this for almost everyone. It takes a long time to make right intention a regular part of your life.

At times, the benefits of acting from your intentions can seem so clear and obvious that you vow, "I'm going to live this way from now on." Then you get lost or overwhelmed and conclude that it is more than you can do. Such emotional reactions, while understandable, miss the point. If you make right intention a goal, you are grasping at spiritual materialism. Right intention is simply about coming home to yourself. It is a practice of aligning with the deepest part of yourself while surrendering to the reality that you often get lost in your wanting mind.

There are only two things you are responsible for in this practice: Throughout each day, ask yourself if you are being true to your deepest intentions. If you're not, start doing so immediately, as best as you're able. The outcome of your inquiry and effort may seem modest at first. But be assured, each time you start over by reconnecting to your intention, you are taking one more step toward finding your own authenticity and freedom. In that moment, you are remembering yourself and grounding your life in your heart's intention. You are living the noble life of the Buddha's teachings. by Phillip Moffitt

Week Seven:

Writing Prompts for Week Seven

1. What were your favorite activities as a child? Do they relate to your chosen line of work in any way?
2. Do you believe that you have a particular genius? If so, what is it? If not, why not?
3. What you were taught about originality, creativity, and risk by your parents?
4. Are you a conformist or an iconoclast? In what ways?
5. What gives you your greatest bliss?
6. Is there something you would regret not exploring if you were to die tomorrow?
7. Do you believe that money is anathema to a true vocation? Or do you believe in getting paid for doing what you love most?
8. Do you have a fear of success? A fear of failure? How does this show up in your life?
9. Are you comfortable with risk? Why or why not?
10. Where do you shrink-to-fit in your life? In what ways (and circumstances) are you afraid to be your biggest, most passionate self?