



The resolve to prevent: skillful effort on the path

Guarding your raft from known hazards

Proactive protection on the journey

"Indeed I would define mental health as the capacity to be aware of the gap between stimulus and response, together with the capacity to use this gap constructively. Thus, mental health, in my judgement, is on the opposite side of the spectrum of conditioning and control." ~ Rollo May

"The best way to predict the future is to create it." ~ Peter Drucker

This chapter delves into the first of the 'Four Great Efforts' that we are reframing as the 'Four Resolves'. These efforts are vital for cultivating helpful mental states and abandoning unhelpful ones.

This practice's focus is the Resolve To Prevent – that is our wholehearted commitment to our liberation. This is our guiding principle that helps us channel our energy wisely and compassionately away from harmful patterns and towards healing and freedom.

The Resolve to Prevent provides us with a skill for creating supportive conditions. This isn't about fearful avoidance or shutting ourselves off from life, but about *wise-protection*. In the early stages of our journey,, especially as our inner resources might still be developing. Prevention strategies act as essential safeguards, giving skilful habits time to strengthen. We acknowledge that it's far easier and wiser to prevent a fire from starting than to extinguish a raging blaze.

Applying our RAFT to Freedom metaphor, the Resolve to Prevent is like being a vigilant navigator. We actively steer our raft away from known hazards, like sharp rocks (triggers) or dangerous currents (high-risk situations). We make an effort to protect the structure of our raft from unnecessary damage by avoiding corrosive environments or predictable storms and hidden reefs – *scanning the horizon for Mara!* It involves foresight and proactive care for our raft and our journey.

The resolve to prevent: proactive protection on the journey

The Resolve to Prevent focuses on proactively creating conditions – both internally and externally – so that unhelpful and unskilful states like harmful cravings, overwhelming negative emotions, addictive thought patterns, or relapse justifications do not arise in the first place. This intention emphasises vigilance and wise restraint, often described as ‘guarding the senses’ or ‘guarding the mind’. It stems from the recognition that certain situations, thoughts, or encounters predictably lead towards suffering or relapse back into our most destructive cravings and habits, . Rather than waiting to deal with a full-blown craving or emotional storm, the first resolve encourages us to anticipate and skilfully avoid or mitigate known risks.

This principle extends to guarding our 'sense doors' or 'six gates' – our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. It's about being mindful of what we allow to enter our awareness. For instance, being discerning about the media we consume, the conversations we engage in, or even the environments we choose to spend our time in – all contribute to preventing unwholesome states from taking root.

Mindfulness Simile: The gatekeeper and the six gates

“Suppose a king had a frontier city with strong ramparts, walls, and arches, and with six gates. The gatekeeper posted there would be wise, competent, and intelligent; one who keeps out strangers and admits acquaintances.”

Gotama's simile of the gatekeeper teaches us the importance of vigilance in safeguarding our minds. Just as a diligent gatekeeper prevents dangerous elements from entering a city, we can learn to guard our senses – to observe, identify, and prevent mental and emotional states that undermine our well-being and recovery.

The role of the gatekeeper in preventing unhelpful states:

- ★ **Recognising unhelpful states:** The gatekeeper must identify harmful elements as they approach, just as we must observe the arising of unhelpful thoughts or emotions.
 - *Example:* Notice when cravings, resentment, or self-pity begin to emerge.
- ★ **Denying entry:** The gatekeeper refuses entry to anything that threatens the city's safety, just as we learn to let go of thoughts or behaviours that lead to harm.
 - *Example:* Interrupt negative thought patterns before they spiral by engaging in a healthy coping mechanism like deep breathing or journaling.
- ★ **Practicing discernment:** The gatekeeper carefully evaluates what is harmful versus helpful, a skill we cultivate through 'mindfulness with clear comprehension' and self-awareness.
 - *Example:* Distinguish between productive reflection and unhelpful rumination.

Applying prevention in daily life

Cultivating this resolve involves several practical strategies:

- ★ **Recognising and managing triggers:** This is foundational. Prevention requires honestly recognising what sets off your cravings or difficult states.
 - **Identify your triggers:** Pay close attention – what people, places, times of day, specific feelings (boredom, stress, loneliness), or thoughts typically precede your urges or cause you to relapse into your destructive cravings and habits, a relapse? Keeping a journal

can help you track these challenging moments and reflect on your patterns.

- **Plan ahead:** Once you have identified your triggers, it can be helpful to prepare specific plans to either avoid them or to manage your response, if avoidance isn't wise or feasible. For example, having an exit strategy for a social event or bringing along a supportive friend and so forth.

★ **Creating supportive routines and environments:** Structure and environment significantly influence our state of mind – *set and setting*.

- **Establish stability:** Regular sleep patterns, healthy meals, exercise and consistent times for helpful practices (like meditation, mindful movement or meetings) create a predictable and stable foundation, reducing our fragility and vulnerability.
- **Replace risky habits and environments:** Consciously choose activities and environments that align with your positive goals. This might mean changing your social circles, finding new hobbies (creative pursuits, learning, volunteering, exercise), or even reorganising your home to remove the cues associated with past behaviours.

★ **Proactive stress management:** Stress is a major relapse trigger. Prevention involves building resilience *before* your stress hits critical levels.

- **Practise calming techniques regularly:** Don't wait until you're overwhelmed. Daily practice of mindfulness, deep breathing, or gentle movement (like Tai Chi or Qigong) helps regulate the nervous system baseline.
- **Develop a calm toolkit:** Identify and gather resources that you can turn to quickly when stress starts to rise – soothing music playlists, guided meditations, contact numbers for supportive friends, grounding objects, calming scents, or a favourite walking route.

Practical strategies for prevention

Drawing from Buddhist teachings and modern psychological insights, here are some ways to actively practise your **Resolve to Prevent**:

- ★ **Mindful Awareness Responds Appropriately (MARA):** As we have discussed previously, this framework provides a simple yet profound guide for this proactive approach:
- **Mindful:** Cultivate *present-moment-recollection*. 'Remember to remember!'
 - **Awareness:** Observe what is happening right now, the experience itself.
 - **Responds:** Choose consciously instead of reacting automatically or habitually. You do have a choice!
 - **Appropriately:** Act wisely and skilfully in whatever situation you find yourself in.

“MARA, I see you!”

- ★ **A ‘SOBER’ Breathing Space:** This is a powerful phrase that suggests pausing mindfully, creating room to respond to triggers and other stimuli rather than react, and holding space for sobriety and clarity.
- **Stop:** Pause whatever you are doing. Interrupt the momentum of craving or reactivity.
 - **Observe:** Notice what is happening in your body, thoughts, and emotions – without judgment.
 - **Breathe:** Take a few slow, conscious breaths. Anchor your attention in your breath.
 - **Expand:** Open your awareness to the whole field of your experience. See the bigger picture. Recognising that all urges are temporary, transient and impermanent.
 - **Respond:** Choose a response aligned with your values, not your impulses. Act with care and resolve.

“Respond mindfully – don’t react automatically!”

NB: The ‘SOBER’ breathing space format is widely used in mindfulness-based relapse prevention (MBRP) and also provides a wonderful tool to apply with the four resolves of recovery.

In the midst of craving or confusion, we can create a *SOBER breathing space* – a pause to come home to the breath, observe our experience with clarity, and choose the next step with wisdom.

As Stephen Batchelor suggests:

“Instead of reacting automatically to life’s challenges, we learn to pause, see what is happening, and respond wisely.”

★ **Early interventions from ancient Buddhist wisdom – The five methods for addressing persistent unhelpful thoughts.**

If an unhelpful thought *begins* to arise despite your plans and efforts to prevent them, these methods offer traditional ways to stop their escalation:

- **Shift focus:** Redirect your attention to a wholesome thought or activity.
- **Consider the dangers:** Reflect on the negative and harmful consequences of indulging in unhelpful thoughts.
- **Disengage:** Deprive the thought of attention and let it fade. Don’t add fuel to the fire – *don’t feed the thought!*
- **Remove the source:** It might seem obvious, but it can be helpful to identify and address the root cause of the thought. Are you surrounded by triggers? *If you are in a betting shop or a pub – leave!*
- **Apply determined restraint:** If all else fails, actively counter any negativity with mindful effort; one suggestion is simply to *grit your teeth!*

★ **Pause and apply ‘clear comprehension’ before acting:**

Before entering potentially triggering situations or making significant decisions – pause. Use mindfulness of breath to ground yourself. Ask: What is my intention (**The Purpose**)? Is this action/situation suitable right now (**The Suitability**)? Can I maintain awareness (**Mindful Presence**)? Am I seeing clearly (**Unconfused**)?

As Rollo May says, this ‘gap’ or *pause* is where our power to choose our

response lies.

★ **Choose supportive environments and activities:**

Consciously select places, people, and activities that nourish your intention to find liberation and minimise exposure to your triggers. This might involve declining certain invitations or changing social habits.

★ **Build protective mental states proactively:**

Don't wait until negativity arises. Regularly practise self-compassion and gratitude to cultivate a positive inner environment that acts as a buffer against stress and craving.

★ **Mindful routines:**

Bring awareness to transition times or routine tasks where autopilot might lead to unskilful and unhelpful habits (for example, arriving home from work, preparing meals). Consciously and skilfully engage with these moments.

★ **Proactive self-compassion:**

Anticipate that challenges *will* arise. Plan how you will respond to potential setbacks or difficult emotions with kindness rather than harsh judgment, preventing shame spirals and negative feedback loops.

★ **‘Sajja’ – The Power of vow - being true to yourself**

The Wat Thamkrabok monastery in Thailand is deeply rooted in the principles and practice of ‘sajja’. Here, *sajja* means to *let go* of established harmful habits primarily, by abandoning our engagement with our addictive substances and behaviours, and committing to cultivating a new life free from what has bound us. At Wat Thamkrabok, after an individual has completed treatment and is clean and sober, then dreams, memories and unwanted thoughts may start to surface, so specific sajjas may be beneficial for continued support and recovery. These personal sajjas – personal resolves – are intended “*for rehabilitation and for the guidance of life.*”

This alternative approach may resonate and be of benefit to some individuals, but obviously we are all different. These personal sajjas or resolves are meant to help us to step out of perpetrator and/or victim mode and support the cultivation of healthy boundaries and being true to ourselves.

Examples may include:

"I will not look outside of myself for my happiness".

"I will not worry about problems that have not yet happened".

"I will not let problems of the past influence the present"

"I will understand that 'no one can do it for me, I must do it for myself'".

"I will forgive myself for the mistakes of the past".

"I will forgive myself for not understanding".

"I will love myself just as I am right here, right now."

"I will not be dependent on someone else".

"I will not love anybody more than I love myself".

"I will not let others make me suffer".

"I will not let anybody dominate me".

"I will not depend on anybody else".

"I will not get angry for one month".

"I will not judge others".

"I will not look at the mistakes of others".

"I will try to live harmlessly in harmony with the Five Gift's (precepts)".

"I will meditate every day for (at least) 10-minutes".

Deeper inquiry exercise: Reorder these examples of personal resolves above, putting the most useful at the top and least helpful at the bottom.

It can be helpful for us to choose one or two personal resolves and commit to these for a certain length of time (for example 3 months), reciting our personal 'sajja' when waking in the morning and before going to sleep, and in times of personal stress.

"The art of living is more like wrestling than dancing, in that it requires a watchful stance against any misstep." — Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

Self-Reflections

Consider your own experience with prevention:

- ★ What specific triggers (internal or external) are you most aware of currently? Are there others you suspect but haven't fully identified?
- ★ How effective are your current strategies for avoiding or managing these triggers?
- ★ What does your daily/weekly routine look like? Does it generally support your journey, or does it contain elements that increase risk?
- ★ What helps you feel grounded and calm?
- ★ What tools are currently in your 'calm toolkit'?
- ★ What does 'guarding the senses' mean to you in practical terms (for example, regarding media consumption, conversations, environments)?
- ★ If you decide to adopt a personal sajja (vow), which one would you choose and why?

Journaling Prompts

Deepen your understanding of prevention through writing:

- ★ **Trigger mapping:** Start a trigger log for a few days or a week. Note down any significant cravings, urges, or difficult emotional states. Record the time, place, people present, preceding thoughts/feelings, and the situation. Review it to identify patterns.
- ★ **Supportive routine design:** Sketch out an ideal (but realistic) daily or weekly schedule that incorporates supportive habits (sleep, meals, exercise, practise, connection, downtime). What is one small change you could implement this week?
- ★ **Building your calm toolkit:** List at least five specific resources or techniques (internal or external) that help you feel calmer or more grounded. How can you make these readily accessible when needed?
- ★ **Guarding the gates:** Reflect on one specific sense gate (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking). How could you apply more mindful guarding to this sense gate today to prevent unskilful states from arising (for example, being mindful of online content, choosing conversations wisely)?

Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of the resolve to prevent, the following overview highlights some key connections.

The wisdom of prevention is echoed in modern science and philosophy:

- ★ **Neuroscience:** Understanding trigger-cue reactivity is key. The brain learns to associate certain cues (people, places, paraphernalia, even internal states) with the reward of addictive behaviour, often involving the amygdala and dopamine pathways. Prevention strategies aim to avoid activating these strong, often subconscious, pathways. The prefrontal cortex (PFC) is crucial for proactive control – anticipating challenges and planning responses, inhibiting impulsive reactions. Preventative stress management helps regulate the HPA axis (the body's stress response system), reducing chronic stress, which can impair PFC function and increase vulnerability to relapse. "*Neurons that fire together wire together*" – Carla J. Shatz
- ★ **Psychology:** Relapse Prevention (RP) models are heavily based on identifying high-risk situations and developing coping strategies in advance. Stimulus control involves modifying the environment to remove triggers and add cues for healthy behaviour. Behavioral Activation emphasizes scheduling positive activities proactively. Proactive coping (anticipating stressors and preparing) is generally more effective than reactive coping (dealing with stress only after it occurs). Environmental psychology studies how our surroundings impact mood and behaviour, supporting the idea of creating supportive environments.
- ★ **Philosophy:** Concepts of prudence, foresight, and practical wisdom (phronesis) emphasise anticipating consequences and acting skilfully to avoid future harm. Stoicism encourages anticipating potential difficulties – not to worry, but to prepare mentally and reduce surprise or overwhelm. Various ethical systems highlight the importance of avoiding situations that predictably lead to unskilful actions ('near occasions of sin'). The idea that our environment and conditions shape our behaviour (situationism) underscores the wisdom of proactively managing our surroundings.

Remember to Remember

The intention to prevent harmful states from arising is an act of wisdom, foresight, and profound self-care. It involves honestly recognising our vulnerabilities and triggers and proactively taking steps to guard our bodies and minds and cultivate supportive conditions. While it requires diligence, prevention is often far less draining than constantly battling fully-arisen cravings or emotional turmoil. This proactive guarding helps protect the integrity of our RAFT, steering it clear of immediate dangers while we build strength and gather further skills.

As Suzy Welch says about resolve:

“99% is a bitch. 100% is a breeze”

Sutta References

★ **Sammappadhana Vibhanga Sutta (SN 45.8) / Anguttara Nikaya 4.13 &**

4.14: These suttas define the Four Right Efforts, including the first.

- Summary: These texts define the first effort as generating desire and exerting intent "for the non-arising of evil, unskilful qualities that have not yet arisen".

★ **Indriya Samvara Suttas (for example, SN 35.120 - The Fisherman's Hook / Adittapariyaya Sutta SN 35.28 - The Fire Sermon):** Emphasise guarding the sense doors.

- Summary: These suttas vividly describe how unguarded contact through the senses (seeing, hearing, etc.) can lead to craving, aversion, and suffering ("burning"). They advocate for restraint (saṃvara) at the sense doors – noticing contact without grasping or rejecting – as a key preventative measure.

★ **Vitakkasanthana Sutta (MN 20 - The Relaxation of Thoughts):** Offers methods for dealing with unskilful thoughts once they start to arise, relevant for preventing their escalation.

- Summary: Provides five practical techniques to counter and remove distracting or harmful thoughts, including replacing them, examining their danger, ignoring them, stilling their formation, and

suppressing them.

★ **Anguttara Nikaya, The Book of the Ones, Ch. IV ("No Other Single Thing"):** Emphasises the profound impact of a tamed mind.

- Summary: States that an untamed mind leads to great loss and woe, while a tamed, controlled, guarded, and restrained mind brings great profit and bliss.

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