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Everyday ritual: how an action keeps what matters in memory

Meaning and Direction

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

P45 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *Intention, I tell you, is kamma.*

— AN 6.63, section on kamma, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997. This Buddhist statement concerns intentional action; it does not promise an outcome from an everyday ritual.

What this article is about

Before leaving home, someone touches a small note beside the door. It says just two words: Slow down. Another person lights a candle in memory of someone who died; another thanks the people whose work brought dinner to the table. These are small movements, yet their significance may reach beyond the movements themselves. A gesture can keep something important present amid ordinary demands. It can also become an empty obligation, a performance, or a condition without which starting the day feels frightening. This article examines everyday ritual as a form of remembrance and attention. It distinguishes a meaningful gesture from a habit, a religious prescription, and a promise of magical effects, drawing on several primary texts without erasing their differences. We then ask which concrete action a form supports, who bears its cost, and whether it can be revised. The subject is what a person freely wishes to remember, with no guaranteed transformation.

I. An action given significance

Not every repetition is a ritual. Someone may close a window each evening because the room gets cold, without giving that movement any further significance. If they pause before closing it to remember whom they intended to call, a different connection appears: a practical movement carries a chosen reminder. We use ritual here in this limited editorial sense. It is not a universal definition of every ceremony, nor a claim that an ordinary gesture is equivalent to a sacrament, a prayer, or a rite established within a tradition.

It helps to distinguish three elements: the form itself, the significance someone gives it, and what they do afterward. The form may be almost invisible: putting down a cup, saying a name, opening a book. Its significance answers what matters at this moment. Subsequent conduct shows whether that concern has a place beyond the moment. If a note recalls kindness but the person then deliberately humiliates someone, touching the paper does not repair the

relationship. This does not make all symbols useless. It establishes the limit of this particular symbol.

Consider an imagined scene. Before dinner, a father names one thing he appreciates. Initially the children listen; later they notice that they may speak only after him and that any reservation is treated as ingratitude. The language of gratitude remains the same, but the arrangement changes what the evening means. In another household the same pause allows silence, tiredness, and a difficult day. These scenes are invented for comparison, not evidence about the effects of dinner rituals. They help show that significance is also shaped by relationships among participants.

A useful starting question is why this person needs this particular form. Because this is what we do can be a meaningful answer: it connects someone with a family, community, or history. It can also conceal a lack of choice. It makes me feel calmer describes an experience without establishing a benefit for the whole of life. Otherwise something terrible will happen raises a separate question about where that condition came from. We first need to hear these differences instead of assigning the same judgment to every repeated action.

II. Remembrance woven into an ordinary day

Deuteronomy 6:4–9 locates remembrance of a commandment in the home, on the road, on waking, and at bedtime; it also speaks of signs and writing. This is a text of covenant and obligation before God, rather than an ancient efficiency tip. We can notice its everyday structure of remembrance while preserving that setting. A contemporary reader may compare this arrangement with their own life, but the comparison remains an interpretation. It does not turn a religious command into a universal technique that means the same thing within every worldview.

A personal sign serves a more modest purpose: it gives someone an opportunity to return to something they have already judged important. This is an editorial account of the sign's purpose, not a finding from memory research. A ring may recall a promise, a photograph a relationship, a date a loss or an expression of gratitude. The object does not deliver an identical message to every observer. Seeing an unfamiliar face in a photograph does not automatically reveal the owner's history. Understanding may require a story, or respectful acceptance that no story is being offered.

An everyday reminder can benefit from being limited in scope. It need not summon every important concern at once or turn breakfast into a final examination of one's life. Suppose someone places their phone face down when another person speaks. The chosen significance is specific: let the speaker finish their thought. It does not mean permanent availability or an obligation to hear every request. The reminder becomes clearer when it includes a boundary.

Someone can listen carefully and still say that there is no time now, or that the request exceeds what they can offer.

Repetition does not preserve significance forever simply by occurring. A note may cease to be noticed; a family story may shrink into a formula; an object may become decoration. These are possibilities, not a law of inevitable decline. Sometimes a familiar form makes presence possible without continual explanation. The relevant question is therefore not how intense the experience feels each time, but whether its significance remains recognizable: can I say what I am remembering, and does my next action fit that concern? This asks for no daily emotional intensity. It invites us not to confuse remembrance with mere movement.

III. Form and humanity in a Confucian text

In Analects 3.3, Confucius connects discussion of ritual propriety with humanity; in 3.4, restraint is compared with extravagance and genuine grief with meticulous outward observance. James Legge's translation expresses these concepts in the language of its period. We cannot simply equate li with a personal habit or ren with a pleasant feeling. The concern is a normative life among people. For this article the relevant, limited question is what happens to a form when it ceases to express an appropriate relation to others. Analects, book 3.

Imagine someone bringing flowers to a family gathering while refusing to let an older relative choose a comfortable seat. The flowers may be a sincere sign of love, yet they do not remove the need to attend to a specific request. The point is not to ban an attractive form. It is to see which action the form accompanies and which it quietly displaces. Sometimes the best way to examine a symbol is to ask its recipient what they actually need. Their answer may alter the familiar ceremony without necessarily diminishing respect for the family.

There is an opposite mistake: calling every form insincere whenever emotion is insufficiently vivid. Someone may follow a familiar farewell on a day when they are exhausted and cannot find words. An outward form can give room to something that cannot yet be expressed another way. Attention to humanity need not require a measurable depth of feeling with every movement. We cannot read another person's inner life from the expressiveness of a gesture. We can more readily ask about freedom, respect, and whether they can be heard even when their participation is quiet or awkward.

The Confucian material does not settle every contemporary dispute about a family tradition in one sentence. It belongs to historical relations of authority and established order that cannot automatically be transferred to a household today. From the passage we take a question about the relation between form and conduct, while keeping its original world distinct. This lets us learn without claiming that the author endorsed our modern decisions. Changing a dinner,

greeting, or memorial gathering remains the participants' responsibility. A reference cannot release them from having the conversation.

IV. When a sign substitutes for an obligation

In Mark 7:1–23, a dispute about outward observance includes the example of Corban: in the case discussed, dedicating a gift is associated with parents being denied help. The text sets this against an obligation and speaks about what proceeds from a person. This is a particular religious dispute within its historical setting, not a characterization of all Jews, all rites, or an entire tradition. We attend to the structure of substitution: a form presented as piety can obscure responsibility. Mark 7:1–23.

In an imagined contemporary situation, someone posts an elaborate annual birthday message to a friend but spends months avoiding the return of a borrowed possession. The message may have value; the problem arises when it is treated as fulfillment of the promise. Obligations do not all reduce to money or services, and friendship is not bookkeeping. Nevertheless, symbolic recognition does not cancel a specific agreement. Understanding the situation may begin with a simple sequence: what was promised, what was done, what remains open, and whether it can be discussed honestly.

The participant may not notice the substitution. They may truly feel gratitude, regret, or a wish to help and mistake that feeling for an action already taken. Asking whether I am sincere is therefore not always enough. A more specific question is who will encounter a consequence beyond my experience. If I recall care for someone close, is a conversation available to them? If I reflect on fairness, have I reconsidered a decision affecting another person? These are questions about conduct, not accusations of hypocrisy. They let a sincere gesture coexist with acknowledgment of unfinished work.

We should not demand an immediate external result from every act of remembrance. A candle for someone who died need not become a useful project, and a minute of silence need not justify itself through productivity. The distinction concerns purpose. A form that keeps a memory can remain a form of remembrance. If it is presented as fulfillment of a promise or a substitute for assistance, a different criterion applies. Careful evaluation first asks what the gesture claims and then whether that claim has been met. Otherwise we replace its significance with our own measure.

V. Intention and what a gesture cannot guarantee

In its section on kamma, AN 6.63 connects intentional action with body, speech, and mind; the wider text addresses several areas of Buddhist teaching. This is not the contemporary slogan that a thought creates any desired reality. Here we use only the distinction concerning intention and action, without claiming to test the Buddhist account of consequences. Intention helps us ask why a gesture is made. It does not authorize a promise that a candle, a word, or repetition will secure success, health, or other people's welfare. AN 6.63, §5.

A person may give an action religious significance that is not exhausted by external verification. But an offer to purchase a form with a guaranteed concrete result makes a testable claim. This gesture expresses my hope and this gesture will prevent misfortune are different propositions. One describes significance for the speaker. The other asserts a causal connection requiring separate support. We can respect hope without accepting an unsupported guarantee. It helps to ask for the promise in precise terms: what is supposed to change, under which conditions, and on what grounds is certainty being offered?

A modest description of one's own ritual might be: when I put down this cup, I recall that I want to speak without rushing. That leaves room for mistakes, repair, and changed circumstances. Someone may forget the pause and still speak respectfully, or perform it and still lose their temper. Neither possibility makes the form a source of control over events. This connection lets us examine subsequent conduct directly instead of attributing every difficult day to an incorrectly performed movement. The ritual becomes an invitation to return to a concern, rather than a condition for deserving a good outcome.

Declining a guarantee need not devalue the action. Preparing a place for conversation, keeping a memorial date, or beginning work with a reminder of honesty can be a meaningful choice. Its significance need not be authenticated by a miracle. Nor does an attractive description remove ordinary questions of cost: how long does it take, does it obstruct others, does it become a reason to demand obedience? If a form requires ever more effort while its purpose grows less clear, it can be altered or paused. That is a decision about participation, not a verdict on the person.

VI. Preparing to encounter the world

In Enchiridion 4, Epictetus suggests recalling possible difficulties before visiting the baths and maintaining the intention to act in harmony with nature. This is a Stoic exercise in relating to circumstances, not a household rite that removes crowds or rude behavior. For our subject, it shows a form of returning to an intention before an encounter. The resemblance to a ritual reminder is limited to that arrangement. The Stoic account of nature and will differs from both Deuteronomy's covenant and Buddhist teaching about kamma. Enchiridion, §4.

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In a contemporary setting, someone reads a line from their own notes before a difficult meeting: clarify first, object afterward. This promises no pleasant meeting and creates no obligation to endure humiliation. It is a chosen order for their response. They may prepare a question that helps them understand a proposal while retaining the option to stop a conversation that crosses a boundary. Preparing for reality means encountering what actually happens. If the reminder requires denying a conflict or accepting the unacceptable, it has ceased to serve its stated purpose and needs reconsideration.

The point of such a beginning is not infallible self-command. A reminder does not produce someone who never feels irritated, tired, or mistaken. It allows a direction to be named in advance and a specific episode to be compared with it afterward. I interrupted my colleague; next time I want to let them finish is a more definite conclusion than I have no idea how to live. A ritual pause may accompany that work without certifying moral superiority. Its value is discussed through participation in the situation, rather than through the status of being a practitioner.

Personal preparation should also not be overrated where a problem is collective. If meetings systematically exclude a participant, that person's morning gesture cannot replace changed rules. If a work schedule leaves no time for rest, a symbolic pause cannot create free hours. Attention to one's conduct can coexist with requests, negotiation, and shared organization. This protects everyday ritual from an excessive burden: it remains a small way to remember a direction, rather than a solution to every material, social, and family circumstance within which someone acts.

VII. A shared form and different ways to participate

A shared ritual does not exist solely in its initiator's mind. If someone proposes a minute of silence at a family gathering, others may experience remembrance, support, an unfamiliar religious affiliation, or a test of loyalty. Its significance cannot be established through the leader's explanation alone. It helps to ask what participants are willing to share and to leave an option not to join. Refusal need not indicate indifference to the people or occasion. It may reflect another faith, a difficult history, a need for privacy, or a wish not to use this form today.

In an imagined team, a manager begins each week with an expression of gratitude. When an employee declines to speak publicly, they are offered a written alternative and later criticized for being closed off. The form of participation changes, but freedom to decline has not appeared. This illustrates the difference between a variety of formats and genuine choice. Another arrangement is to invite anyone who wishes to speak and then begin work without evaluating those who remained silent. Neither arrangement guarantees a good atmosphere; the latter simply avoids making a symbolic act a hidden condition of group recognition.

Family remembrance can differ among participants too. One person treasures a holiday recipe while another recalls painful circumstances around those same celebrations. A conversation about tradition becomes more accurate when both histories can be voiced. The dish might stay while the gathering changes, a compulsory toast is dropped, or another date is chosen. This may be difficult when the form is connected with someone who died. We then need to distinguish love for that person from the untouchability of every detail of a ceremony. Respect may mean preserving a form or attending to someone unable to repeat it now.

Simple conditions can be named for a shared form: its duration, significance, permission to remain silent or leave, and the absence of penalties for participating differently. This is an editorial proposal, not a universal rule for religious communities. Where a rite has an established meaning, naming its affiliation is more honest than presenting it as neutral for everyone. People can then decide how to respond to the invitation. Clarity need not destroy connection. It helps identify the connection actually possible among people with different commitments, without assuming their agreement in advance.

VIII. When revision protects what matters

An everyday form can be revised without making a total decision about faith, family, or identity. A place, a schedule, or a physical capacity may change. Someone can no longer stand by the window, relatives live in different cities, or necessary work occupies the customary day. The question becomes what should be preserved: presence, remembrance, conversation, gratitude. Naming the significance makes another action conceivable. This does not mean every religious form is freely interchangeable. Its established requirements must be understood within the relevant tradition, rather than inferred from permission supposedly supplied by this article.

Suppose two people close to each other have a Sunday walk to discuss the week. After a schedule change, one starts experiencing it as another duty. They could defend the exact date and argue every week, or ask what the walk offered each of them. Perhaps the important element was time together rather than the route. Perhaps the place itself carries a special memory for one person. A decision would then require discussing different values, rather than finding a single convenient substitute. Revision helps when it makes those differences visible instead of treating someone's difficulty as a defective attitude.

Sometimes the form can stay while a promise is removed from it. Morning reading may cease to be a condition of a correct day and remain a time to encounter a text. A memorial dinner may stop demanding cheerfulness from everyone. A journal entry may become optional when someone needs sleep. These are small changes to an agreement with oneself or others. They should not be presented as therapy or a remedy for every tension. They do allow people to ask

whether an action supports what matters now and to notice a cost previously treated as inseparable from its significance.

If interrupting a sequence brings intense fear, obstructs everyday activities, or requires more and more repetitions, an article should not encourage intensifying the ritual. We cannot establish the cause of that experience or give it a diagnosis here. It is more reasonable to discuss the difficulty with an appropriate professional, describing what happens and how it limits life. A religious interlocutor may clarify the meaning of a prescription, but that does not automatically replace help with another kind of problem. The support needed depends on the difficulty itself, rather than on an attractive name for a practice.

IX. A small sign and a substantial freedom

These texts do not speak with one voice. Deuteronomy joins daily remembrance to covenant; the Confucian passage questions the relation of humanity to form; Mark presents a particular conflict between observance and obligation; AN 6.63 treats intentional action within Buddhist teaching; Epictetus prepares an attitude toward possible circumstances. Comparison does not prove identity. It offers distinct questions to ask of a contemporary gesture. What does it remember? How does it relate to people? What can it not replace? Which intention does it express? What reality does it prepare us to encounter? The answers remain ours, and the differences remain real.

The outcome of a conversation about personal ritual can be modest. Someone understands why a photograph stays by their desk; someone else drops a compulsory toast; another retains a prayer within its own religious affiliation. Readers need no universal set of actions. Having a ritual does not make a life deeper by definition, and having none does not prove an absence of meaning. Attention may be expressed through a repeated gesture, a changed schedule, an honest answer, or a fulfilled promise. A form can be chosen in relation to what it actually serves.

People also need room for imperfect participation. They can forget a memorial date and still love, remain silent and still feel gratitude, alter a form and still keep a connection. This is not an excuse for broken promises; those require their own conversation. The point is that a sign should not become the sole proof of an inward relation. When it is given that authority, participants start protecting an external order instead of discussing what matters. A more open form permits clarification: I remember this, although today I want to express it differently. The other person may hear that and respond.

Everyday ritual keeps something important in memory in a limited human sense: a person returns to a significance through a chosen action. It does not govern the future or release them from their next act. We can therefore take it seriously without making it untouchable. Naming

its purpose, noticing its cost, asking participants, and distinguishing remembrance from a fulfilled promise are enough for an attentive beginning. A decision may then be simple: retain, change, postpone, or stop. What matters does not always disappear with the form. Sometimes the freedom to revise helps reveal what someone wished to preserve.

What this means in practice

Choose one small repeated gesture already present in your life. You do not need to invent a new ritual or borrow a religious form to which you do not belong. This reflection is voluntary and can be skipped. Describe in ordinary words what you do, when, and with whom. Separately name its significance: what do you want to remember? One specific concern is preferable to a demand to become a completely different person.

Look at the most recent occasion. What happened after the gesture? If its significance concerns another person, was the corresponding attention available to them? If it commemorates someone or something, do not require a useful outcome. Distinguish the form's purpose from a promise you may quietly have added. Do not judge your whole life by one episode.

Name the cost in time, money, effort, and other people's participation. Can they decline? If you do not know, ask without persuasion or a test of loyalty. Then choose one option for the next occasion: retain the form, simplify it, explain its meaning, offer another way to participate, or pause. The task is to clarify how an action relates to a concern, rather than produce an intense experience.

After the next occasion, two brief notes are enough: what I wished to remember and what I actually did. A discrepancy is not a verdict. It may show that a promise needs its own action. If this exercise intensifies fear of interrupting a form or makes you repeat it against your wishes, stop. It is not a treatment and cannot replace help with a difficulty that substantially interferes with life.

Key quotation

> *shall be in thine heart*

— Deuteronomy 6:6, short excerpt, King James Version. The source concerns words of command within a covenant, rather than every personal reminder.

Connections between traditions

Source or tradition	Basis in the passage read	Question for an everyday form	Essential distinction
Jewish biblical text	Deuteronomy 6:4–9 places remembrance of a command in ordinary life	What does the sign preserve?	Covenant before God is not a personal memory technique
Confucianism	Analects 3.3–3.4 relates form to humanity and genuine grief	How does the form relate to people?	Li is not merely habit; its historical normative setting remains relevant
Christian text	Mark 7:1–23 discusses observance, Corban, and obligation	Does the sign displace responsibility?	A particular dispute does not characterize all Jews or all rites
Early Buddhist text	AN 6.63, §5 connects kamma with intention	Why is the action undertaken?	This teaching promises no control of events through a household gesture
Stoicism	Enchiridion 4 recalls possible circumstances and an intended way of acting before an encounter	What does the beginning prepare for?	An attitude toward circumstances does not guarantee favorable circumstances
UW editorial comparison	The contemporary scenes in this article are authored illustrations	Who chooses the form and bears its cost?	Analogies establish neither identity of teachings nor evidence of efficacy

Primary sources

1. Deuteronomy 6:4–9, KJV. The indicated passage was read: commandment, everyday remembrance, and signs. A short excerpt is quoted; the Russian version is UW's own translation.

2. Analects, book 3, translated by James Legge. Sections 3.3–3.17 were read, especially 3.3–3.4, on form, humanity, and grief.

3. Mark 7:1–23, KJV. The entire indicated passage was read, including Corban in 7:10–13 and the dispute's context.

4. AN 6.63, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1997. The page was read, especially §5. The Buddhist account of intention is retained; no household effect of ritual is established.

5. Epictetus, Enchiridion, §4, translated by Thomas W. Higginson. Sections 1–4 and edition information were read, including the reminder before visiting the baths. Contemporary illustrations and the suggested reflection are editorial proposals, not a demonstrated intervention.

Tags

ritual, everyday life, remembrance, attention, symbol, gesture, habit, meaning, intention, humanity, relationships, family, tradition, choice, boundaries, promise, responsibility, gratitude, grief, commandment, covenant, Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Stoicism, primary sources, comparison, revision, practice

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.