What Are You Doing Right Now

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There’s a question that the Buddha recommends we ask ourselves every day. The question is this. Days and nights fly past, fly past. What am I doing right now? So, what are you doing right now? Notice he’s not asking who you are. What are you doing? That’s important. You look at the Buddha’s early teachings. You look at all of his teachings. He never discusses what a human being is or tries to ask you to define yourself. In fact, he discourages people from trying to define themselves. He says as soon as you define yourself, you limit yourself. You get bound by the definition. So one way of freeing yourself is to focus instead on what you’re doing and the possibilities of what you could be doing. It’s possible for us to act in such a way that we can put an end to suffering. And, as he said, that’s what his teachings are all about—suffering and the end of suffering. Both of these things involve doing. There are certain things we do that cause us to suffer, and others we can do that can put an end to suffering. So that’s where he has your focus—on your actions, understanding your actions. This is good. If you try to understand what you are, you get involved in all kinds of speculations that really go nowhere. But if you focus on what you’re doing, it’s something you can actually watch. Your actions in the past, your actions in the present—these are things you can know. And the shame is that most of us don’t know. We go through life oblivious to our intentions, oblivious to what we’re actually doing, and oblivious to the results of what we’re doing. As a result, we miss the opportunity. So put an end to suffering. Learn how to focus on what you’re doing. What you’re doing, of course, is creating intentions in the mind. The purpose of the practice is to, one, learn how to be more skillful in those intentions, and then, two, how to look at the process of intention in and of itself to understand action. This is why the teaching starts with teachings on virtue. Learn how to abstain from unskillful actions. And even prior to virtue, the Buddha talks about generosity, giving rise to good actions, being helpful. Generosity doesn’t mean just material things. You can be generous with your time, generous with your knowledge, generous with your forgiveness. Learning how to be more skillful in how you deal with other people is an important part of the practice, so that when you sit down and actually look at your mind, it’s not cluttered up with regrets or blinded by denial. You look back on what you’ve done in the course of the day. You don’t have to regret it. You don’t have to deny it. You don’t have to deny it to yourself. That means you can observe it clearly. What did you do today and what impact is it having on the mind? And what are you doing right now? If you want to understand the process of intention, one, set up a really clear intention. Like right now, you’re going to stay with the breath. You’re going to watch the breath come in, watch the breath go out. Then you’re going to learn how to augment that intention. Simply making the intention is not going to make it last. You’ve got to learn how to nurture it, how to keep it going. You can do this by experimenting with the breath. Make this a process of exploration. You’re not tying the mind down to something boring. You’re actually focusing it on something interesting, this breath energy in the body. When you use the word breath, it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the whole movement of energy, the quality of energy throughout the body, all the way through the nervous system, out to every pore. How does your in-and-out breathing affect that energy? You can experiment. Long breathing, short breathing, or in-long, out-short, in-short, out-long, deep, shallow, heavy, light, fast, slow. There are lots of ways you can breathe. So just pose the question in the mind, “What way of breathing would feel most nourishing right now? What way of breathing would feel most satisfying right now?” If you’re feeling tired, you can ask yourself, “What way of breathing would be most energizing?” Or if you’re feeling tense, “What way of breathing would be most relaxing?” Simply pose those questions in the mind and then watch what the body does. One thing you might do is try to find one spot in the body where the process of breathing seems clearest, where you can have a sensation that now you know the breath is coming in, now you know the breath is going out. Focus on that spot. It could be the tip of the nose, the middle of the chest, the abdomen—anywhere in the body. And then try to keep that spot. Keep that spot open and relaxed all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. In other words, don’t squeeze it out. Allow it to remain open all the way through the breath process, and a sense of fullness will develop there. Once it’s there, think of it just spreading anywhere it wants to go throughout the body. Think of all the different energy channels you might have through the body, and think of that fullness spreading out through the body, again, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Then try to maintain it. Again, you have to maintain it with a relaxed but steady attitude. If you start clamping on it, trying to force it to stay, of course, you turn it into a kind of energy that’s not full, it’s not refreshing anymore. So there’s lots to do here in the present moment just to stay with the breath. It’s not a matter of clamping down on your mind and forcing it to stay with something boring or something mechanical. This is an organic process. In fact, it is the ultimate organic process—the breath energy in the body. So give it some space to feel wide, open, and full. And in this way, you augment that original intention to stay right here. It’s a first-degree practice in maintaining a single intention. This is what concentration practice is all about. The more you get more familiar with it, you’ll begin to see that you’re also learning things about the whole process of intention. How does it happen? On the one hand, you’ll begin to see other intentions come in. For the time being, you want to resist the intention to go and think about something else. Here, you’ve got a whole hour. Boy, you could think about all kinds of things—work, school, family issues. Pick up some unfinished business from the past and then chew over it for a while. There are all kinds of ways you could waste your time. Again, days and nights fly past, fly past. Is that the best thing to be doing with your time? Wouldn’t it be much better to develop good, solid qualities in mind, like mindfulness and alertness? So you let those other intentions go. That’s one way of learning about intention. The other is to actually notice what is this process of what we’re doing here. The Buddha calls it bringing something into being, as we bring concentration into being. He analyzes it into three factors. One, there’s the past karma, the results of your past actions. This body that you’re sitting in here with right now, the mind, the habits that you’ve got, these are all past actions, results of past actions. That, he says, is the soil. And then consciousness is the seed. For the time being, your consciousness is focused on the breath. You want to be focused on something positive. But the fact that you’ve got that seed, that nucleus, that spot, where you’re focused, that’s important. Because this is how the mind works. The mind moves around from thought world to thought world, and it’s the same process when you die. You leave this life and go on to the next one. It’s this seed of consciousness. As the Buddha said, it gets watered by craving, by desire. For many of us, our desires are unskillful, and that’s why we suffer. But you can also convert this process of desire into a healthy thing. Develop concentration, develop steadiness of mind. There has to be an element of desire there. Otherwise, it wouldn’t happen. So what we’re doing is we’re creating these states of being in the mind through our intentions, so that we can observe the whole process. And with the fullness that comes from this particular state of being, it makes it easier to engage, to see how you create a state of being in the mind, how you nurture it, how you keep it going. So by creating good states of being in the mind, it’s like giving the mind good food to feed on. You can start comparing this food with the other food that the mind has been nibbling at or sneaking little bites here and there. This is much more nourishing. This is much healthier food. This is one way that meditation helps you overcome your old addictive patterns, your old attachments, your old unskillful habits. You’ve simply got something better to feed on, something more nourishing, something that really goes deep down inside, something you experience with your whole body. So you work on that concentration. Then you have a wider range of habits, a wider range of opportunities and possibilities when you’re looking for happiness at any particular moment. And by having this better skill here, that’s one way that helps you overcome your old unskillful habits. If in the past you’ve been looking for happiness solely in sensual pleasures, you’re in a much better position now to really look at those pleasures for what they are, to see their drawbacks. And they get less and less enticing. Then, when you’ve dealt with those attachments, you look at this process you’ve been developing right here with the concentration. That’s when you take this apart. You begin to see that this, too, is factually fabricated, put together through intention. And because it’s fabricated, it can’t really last. So even though the stillness, the peace you may gain this way may seem very elemental, some people get the idea that they’ve reached the ground of being when the body is filled with awareness. Your whole range of awareness is filled with mindfulness and alertness. Consciousness itself becomes an object. Again, the Buddha has you look at this as a process, something that you’re doing. Days and nights fly by, fly by. What are you doing right now? And when it really hits home that this, too, has an element of stress, it’s not constant. It inclines to something totally deathless, totally unfabricated, totally unconditioned. It’s only at that point where you really are not doing anything at all. So this path we’re following here is called the karma that leads to an end of karma. It leads to the end of suffering. But it’s something that you do to get there. So again, this question is always the paramount question. What are you doing right now? What have you done? What are the results of what you’ve done? What are the results of what you’re doing? Could it be more skillful? Those are the central questions the Buddha has us keep asking. This is how we take those questions and put them to the best use. We’re putting an end to suffering. We’re following the path. That’s the best answer. Next to the answer that says, “Okay, I’ve done, I’ve completed the path,” that would be the absolute best answer. But for the time being, our best answers are, “I’m on the path,” learning to understand what it means to be doing something and doing what’s right. We’re doing our best to do it well.

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