

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, the Buddha's not asking *who* you are. He's asking what you're 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 that 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. As he said, that's what his teachings 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 you 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. 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 to put an end to suffering.

So 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, one, to learn how to be more skillful in those intentions, and then two, to learn 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 acting on unskillful intentions, and you'll learn a lot about your intentions, both those that go in line with the precepts and those that go against them.

Even prior to virtue, the Buddha talks about generosity: giving rise to good actions, being helpful. Generosity doesn't mean giving 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. That's an important part of the practice.

That way, when you sit down and actually look at your mind, it's not cluttered with regrets. We tend to be blinded by denial. But if you can look back on what you've done in course of the day and see that there's nothing to regret, that you don't have to deny anything to yourself, then you can observe the day clearly: What did you do today? 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 good, clear intention. Like right now: You're going to stay with the breath, to watch the breath come in, watch the breath go out. Then you learn how to augment that intention, because simply making the intention is not going to make it last. You've got to learn how to nurture it and 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 on something interesting: this breath energy in the body.

When we 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 and out to every pore. How does your in-and-out breathing affect that energy? You can experiment with 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 to 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. If you're feeling tense, what way of breathing would be most relaxing? Simply pose those questions to the mind, and watch what the body does.

One thing you might do to is to try to find one spot in the body where the process of breathing seems clearest, where you can detect the sensations that let you know that now the breath is coming in, now 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. Then try to keep that spot open and relaxed, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. Don't squeeze it out. Allow it to remain open all the way through the breath process. A sense of fullness will develop there.

Once it's there, think of it spreading anywhere it wants to go throughout the body. Think of all the different energy channels you might have in 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-

Then try to maintain it. This requires that you approach it with a relaxed but steady attitude. If you start clamping down on it and trying to force it to stay, of course you turn it into a different kind of energy, and it'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's the ultimate organic process: the breath energy in the body. So give it some space to feel wide open and full. In this way, you augment and extend that original intention to stay right here.

This is the first thing you practice here. You're maintaining a single intention. This is what concentration practice is all about.

As you get more familiar with it, you begin to see that you're also learning things about the whole process of intention. How does it happen? On the one hand, you begin to see other intentions coming in, but for the time being, you want to resist them. Such as the intention to think about something else: 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 chew over it for a while. There are all kinds of ways you can waste your time. But 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 of mind, like mindfulness and alertness?

So you let those other intentions go.

That's one way of learning about intention. The other is actually noticing: What is this process that we're doing here? The Buddha calls it bringing something into being, as we bring concentration into being. He analyzes this into three factors. One is the past karma, the results of your past actions. This body that you're sitting with here right now, the mind, the habits you've got: These are all the results of past actions. That, he says, is the soil.

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 your mind moves around from thought world to thought world. The same process happens when you die. As you leave this life and go on to the next life, it's this seed of consciousness.

That seed, as the Buddha says, gets watered by craving, by desire. Now, for many of us, our desires are unskillful, which is why we suffer. But you can also convert this process of desire into a healthy thing, as you're doing right now: You're trying to develop concentration, develop steadiness of the mind. There has to be an element of desire there. Otherwise it wouldn't happen.

We're creating these states of being in the mind, through our intentions, so that we can observe the whole process. The fullness that comes from this particular state of being makes it easier to watch, to see how you create a state of being in the mind, how you nurture it, and how you keep it going. Creating good states of being in the mind is like giving the mind good food to feed on. It can then start comparing this food with the other foods that it's been nibbling at or sneaking little bites from here and there. You realize that this is much more nourishing, this is much healthier food.

This is one way that meditation helps you overcome your 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.

You work on concentration so as to have a wider range of habits, a wider range of opportunities and possibilities, when you're looking for happiness in any particular moment. Having this better skill here is one way that helps you to overcome your own 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. They get less and less enticing.

Then when you've dealt with those attachments, then you turn around and you look at this process you've been developing right here: the concentration. That's when you take this apart. You begin to see that this, too, is fabricated, put together through intention, and because it is fabricated, it can't really last. So even though the stillness, the peace you may gain this way may seem very elemental, it's still constructed.

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, and consciousness itself becomes an object. But again, the Buddha has you look at this as a process, something you're doing as days and nights fly past, fly past. What are you doing right now? When it really hits home that this, too, has an element of stress and is not constant, the mind inclines to something totally deathless, totally unfabricated, totally unconditioned. It's only at that point when you really are doing nothing at all.

This path we are 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 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 they 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, in following the path to the end of suffering. That's the best answer, next to the answer that says, "I'm 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 our best to do it well.