

Practice Note: One Thing at a Time

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 28, 2010

One of the very significant ways of focusing both mindfulness practice and concentration practice is to remember the idea of doing just one thing at a time. When you do one thing at a time, you can enter into that activity more wholeheartedly; more of yourself can be put into it. Our wholehearted effort is such a precious thing. To be able to give it to one thing allows for purity, integrity, wholeness, and greater insight into what's going on.

In terms of walking or sitting meditation, doing one thing at a time would mean – if you're doing breath meditation – knowing that the one thing you're here to do is to really be mindful of your breath as fully as you can, and it is not to be with the breath and to also be thinking about plans for the rest of the day. When you do walking meditation, the practice is to be wholeheartedly involved in the process of walking, and not thinking about what's going on around you or about other people. Are you walking as well as they are? The mind can get involved in other activities besides the activity of walking.

If you have to think while sitting or walking, then think about sitting; think about breathing; think about your steps. Do one thing, and have everything involved in just one thing. Try to keep it really simple. This morning I offer you the idea of just doing one thing at a time. If you go to the bathroom, just do that. If you need to do something that's different than the walking or sitting, think of doing it like, "This is what I'll do wholeheartedly." It can be as simple as, if you're going to open the door to go to the bathroom, just open the door. You can open the door and be thinking about all kinds of other things, but what is it like to just open the door?

I'll end with the answer that the famous Catholic monk, Thomas Merton, gave when he was asked what he learned in his years of monastic life. He said, "After years of monastic life, I learned to open and close doors." May you open and close your doors, if that's the one thing you're doing, when you are opening and closing your door.