

## Dharmette: The Wisdom of Doing Nothing

**Gil Fronsdal**

**April 09, 2025**

**Keywords:** mindfulness, Buddha, renunciant, monastic, action, desire, meditation, self-awareness, verbal daggers, Spirit Rock

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In this mindfulness practice that we do, there are a lot of different pieces of wisdom or perspectives that are useful to learn over time, and to be given all of them at once is too much. But slowly, over time, you learn the different aspects of it and learn when these different things are useful. What's coming to mind at this moment is, first, I want to say that the Buddha in his time was sometimes seen as a teacher of action. In other words, living in the world, behaving and acting in the world, was an important part of it. It was not a renunciant tradition in the sense of going to live in a cave or avoid society. He sent his monastics out not to be renunciants in that way.

They renounced in a certain way. They gave up many of the ordinary things of life, but they're not supposed to disappear. They wandered around India. They'd go into villages and towns and meet people and have exchanges with them. So, living our life is kind of in the background of all this. But one of the really important things to do in this practice, one of the really important pieces of wisdom, is really essential at certain points in practice.

And that is to do nothing. Just don't do anything. When is it useful to do nothing? When is that really the right thing in practice? Certainly, when doing something makes it worse. If it's going to make it worse, don't do it.

That's a time to don't do. Leave yourself alone. Don't say it. Don't do it. Don't even think it. Other times, sometimes it's a little bit of a higher standard, and that is, if it doesn't make it better, don't do it.

Why that's a nice higher standard is that then maybe you will look for what's the better thing to do here. What is more useful? How can I improve the situation? When you're going to make it worse, it might be good enough just to not do that. Maybe it's too difficult to find

how to make it better, but at least you're not making it worse. But if it doesn't make it better, then don't do it.

Then maybe there's time to consider what's better. I've done that often enough to see, gotten the, seen the results of doing that. One result is by not doing it, what I do do is that then what I bring to that situation is more mindfulness. Okay, let me just not do anything here, say anything, let me not act in any kind of way. But let me stay present and aware, mindful of what's going on. Then, over time, sometimes just a couple of minutes, sometimes relatively soon, something else comes along, some other understanding, some other actions, some other thing to say, I understand now, okay, now this is a better way to go.

So don't do anything sometimes creates the space to see more clearly, the space to register and take things in. Sometimes, don't do anything because it makes the situation worse. The worse can be long-term. You make it worse, and then now this person you're with doesn't trust you. Now it'll take, you know, a few months, a few years before you'd build up trust again. But they're willing to kind of trust you and relax around you because they have enough evidence now that you're not going to attack them with your words.

The Buddha talked about having verbal daggers. So people don't have to worry about your verbal daggers anymore. The other value of not doing anything and why it's so useful for practitioners, at certain points in practice, is the idea to learn about yourself, to really understand yourself well. If you're automatically giving in to your impulses, automatically saying what wants to be said, blurting it out, and you keep doing it, it becomes a kind of self-alienation. We kind of lose touch with ourselves. We're always out there doing and doing.

But if we stop doing, really stop, then we have a chance to see what's happening here with me. What's going on now? Or what's going on with the person I'm with? What's happening? I've told the story enough, but I want to say it again, because it was such a big lesson for me. I used to work at a restaurant, and we had shifts.

There was this changing room for the staff. We came to start our shift or finish our shift. I was finishing my shift, and I had a friend who was coming to start his shift. I was kind of happy. I'd been fully engaged in the work. It was kind of like a little bit, maybe, going, I don't know what, just kind of going, going, going, because it was kind of a fast restaurant at work.

So he came in, and I immediately, seeing my friend, made some kind of joke. Said something, I don't know, a joke. It wasn't that bad a thing to say. So I said something, you know, silly or jokingly or something. And then he said, oh, my best friend just died. I was kind of like so remorseful. Like, what did I just put salt in his wound? I didn't take time to find out where he

was at.

From that lesson, I said, oh, wait, don't do anything automatically like that. Wait until you know who's there. Wait until you know how they are. So sometimes it's useful not to do anything because you get to know them. Sometimes it's useful not to do anything because you get to know yourself better. I've done that sometimes and realized that I was going to say something without knowing that I was angry.

But once I saw my anger, then I say, okay, Gil, let's be careful now. This is not the time and place to be angry. Not every place, you know, isn't that anger needs to be suppressed, but it sometimes makes a situation worse. Even if you have, you're completely justified in being angry—boy, am I ever right, that person really screwed up? How could they do that? But if you make the situation worse, is that, even if you're justified, is that really good? Does that really help you?

Anyway, so I've paused and see, oh, I'm angry here. Look, I need to tend to this. I need to be responsible for this now. Sometimes I've noticed I was anxious. Sometimes I've stopped to notice that I'm tense. I didn't know that I was tense.

The representative example of that that I've sometimes taught was many years ago. I was a graduate student. Back then, things weren't available online. It was in the prehistoric times. I'm so old, so I remember back just after writing was invented. So I was a graduate student, and the UC Berkeley Library had the book that I needed.

I could see it. So I went over there to look for it, and somehow I had the indication that they had it. It was in the shelves for my dissertation. So it was an important book to have. It wasn't on the shelf. So I went to the desk and said, you know, it's not on the shelf.

He said, well, I can't help you. I said, but maybe someone has turned it in and it's still on the cart in the back. No, no, no, no. Can't you check? Can we ask someone else? So I got kind of worked up around this. The person finally said, I'll go check. Only then did I stop to notice what was happening to me.

I think I was on my tippy toes, stretched out over the top of the counter, leaning over everything. I said, wow, that's quite something. Boy, am I tense and aggressive and, you know, no wonder the person tried to get away. You can go into the back room and check. So this idea of not being in touch with ourselves, being so caught up in what we're doing—stop, don't do anything. It's one of the great tools of, I think, any wise life, but certainly a life that's dedicated to mindfulness is to learn the art of not doing anything.

But that's not the same as being passive. It's not the same as being aloof or being uncaring or just being kind of not participating in a situation. I had a friend who was a long-time practitioner, and he irritated people because he didn't have any desires. He was very, I don't know what his story was, but he was a practitioner. Some people get the idea that in Buddhism you're not supposed to have desires. So whenever you ask them a question, where should we go eat? Or what would you like to order? What would you like? Whatever you'd like. Whatever you'd like.

He didn't have any desires. It was just kind of a drag. It was like all the responsibility was on us. You know, you could participate, you could just be ordinary, you could just offer something. Without any attachment, you know, I'll just take the first thing on the menu. Something. But it's like, no, whatever you want, whatever you want. So not doing anything is not like that.

But remember, Buddha taught action. So action, doing, is important. But there is a time and place where it's invaluable to do nothing. Treasure it. Find those times. Learn when it's useful to do nothing.

Don't make the situation worse. Learn how to make it better. Learn about yourself better that way. What's going on inside of you? And learn about the situation, the people you're with. Because that not doing anything gives you time to really take in what's going on.

This applies to meditation as well. There's a time and place where meditation also, it's better to do nothing. Don't try to fix every problem you have that comes along in meditation. Don't try to solve it. Don't try to get out of it. Sometimes just give it time. Don't do anything and see what happens, see what you'll learn. Maybe you'll learn how to make it better. Or you'll learn that doing nothing was all you needed to do to make it better.

So those are my thoughts for today. So thank you all very much. I wish I could stay for our time to have lunch or tea together. I hope many of you stay. It's very nice to time. But I'll be leaving during this cleaning time because I have to be up there at Spirit Rock for opening meetings for the retreat. So thank you for today. Thank you.