

Doing One Thing At A Time and Consistency

Gil Fronsdal

November 29, 2020

Keywords: mindfulness, monastic life, practice, consistency, constancy, right speech, precepts, meditation, embodied presence, loving-kindness

So good morning again. And so I'd like to talk about two principles for practice that can really allow this Buddhist practice or mindfulness practice to develop or to grow in ways that can be done, so that it's how we live our daily life. Even that supports the growth of the practice. So I spent ten years of my life living in a kind of monastic Buddhist settings. Very important times for me. I mention it now because I want to say that during those ten years, I didn't study Buddhism much, and I didn't change, grow, or develop in the practice much through study; the primary benefits that came from those years came from my doing what I did, the activities of certainly meditation, but the activities of monastic life, and having that ability in monastic life to kind of approach all things that I did throughout the day, being reminded throughout the day that I was doing this in a Dharmic way, doing this mindfully and with present so that it was in the activities of doing that something began opening, releasing, freeing, growing inside of me.

And so doing, rather than studying, learning by doing. And there were two things that I learned that really made this doing of practice in everyday life, really gave it power, or really added value to it. And it has to do with how we do things. And so these two things, or to do one thing at a time, and to practise with consistence, with constancy. So to do one thing at a time.

The kind of representative of this for me was I was practising in a monastery in Japan. One of the more senior monks was in the kitchen chopping vegetables one evening, and I had a question, something I wanted to ask him. I don't think it was particularly important. So he was there with the knife chopping vegetables at the cutting table, and I went over, and I asked him my question, and he put the knife down, looked up from the vegetables, and just answered me directly, fully—he was fully there to answer me. And when he finished, he

picked up the knife and continued chopping. And I asked another question, and he put the knife down, turned to me, and was there fully there to answer my question.

He wasn't going to do two things at a time. He wasn't going to chop and talk. He was going to just be there to answer me. That was nice. He finished and again started chopping, and so I asked again. I hadn't really noticed what he was doing, what was happening. I just was more interested in the conversation, I guess.

So the third time, he put down his knife and he said to me, Gilson, you know, I'm here to chop the vegetables, maybe for tomorrow's meal. And I can't really do my work if you keep asking me questions, because he was only going to do one thing at a time. And so then I understood what he was doing. I understood that he, you know, was doing one thing, and if he was going to talk to me, he was going to talk to me. But if he was going to chop, he was going to chop. And what I was talking about was not that important.

And the chopping was, in a sense, you know, I don't know it was important or not, but exactly at that moment. But the important thing for him was he was there to practise, and for practice for him meant to be fully there for the activity and not to be split. And I was coordinating him away from his job, and so this idea of really kind of being present for what he did. And I also learned a lot of that for myself when I was in the kitchen at the monastery, working, and I'd never really worked in the kitchen before. So was all cut a new learning to chop was new, and, you know, the certain skills of chopping and cooking all kinds of things. But when I first came in the kitchen, I think I wasn't really that interested in being a cook or cooking.

And, you know, chopping five gallons of onions or carrots was not my idea of a good time, but I was there too. And before I got into the kitchen, I'd picked up a spiritual book on a book shelf in a bookstore, and I opened it at random to see what would I read? What it said, and I said read the sentence that something like the problems most people have is not participating fully with what they're doing. And I kind of thought that was, and I close the book, and that kind of rang in mind. That's one sentence stuck with me for a long time, and so when I was working in the kitchen, it was still there. The sentence, The problem we have is not participating fully.

So I started paying attention to this, and I noticed that I wasn't fully there with the carrots. I was physically—I noticed my body that I was actually half turned towards the door, as if I really wanted to leave, and I was not really wholehearted about it. It was like I was kind of putting up with it. And so I noticed this about myself. So then I practised turning back to just be with the carrots and just fully be chopping carrots. And not too long afterwards, I'd find my body would turn away again, and my mind would drift off, and there was other things I

had in mind, and now this was kind of boring to me.

Two carrots, and I came back to the carrots. And so those carrots became my teacher. The vegetables became my teacher. And I learned so much about myself, and I learned about turning back, and just doing one thing at a time, and not just being fully there for that. And with time, I learned to enjoy quite chopping vegetables. But not so much the vegetables, maybe, but what I enjoyed was the whole heartedness of just being with the vegetables, just chopping just this activity, and thus giving myself over fully to one activity, and not being distracted, not being split, not being resentful, or not being kind of resisting to what was happening, and giving myself fully for this activity that I was supposed to be doing anyway.

So I might as well do it fully, and the consequences of that. I learned a lot about the value of just really being with one thing. I also got to be fairly good at chopping vegetables. I also noticed that when I practised that way, sometimes after a session in the kitchen, we'd go back up into the meditation hall to meditate, and if I was kind of like fighting being in the kitchen and not really there for what I was doing when I was a prep cook, chopping a lot of vegetables, that when I sat down to meditate I would actually be distracted and it would take a while to settle down. But if I was really present for the carrots while I did the carrots, the present for the activity that I was doing, it was also like washing dishes—I had to do what we had to do a lot of pots in the kitchen, just do the pot washing. If I just did practise that way, when I went back to the meditation hall to meditate, I would already be concentrated, or I was, or non distracted, and I could settle really fast.

And I saw the benefits of just really doing one thing at a time, and I see still to this day I see how easy it is for my mind to start being more split in the activities that I do. Even earlier today I saw that I was doing one thing. I was moving through to go somewhere, and to do that on purpose, had something to do, and my mind starting, Oh, just do that. Do this thing the way. Or, Wait a minute, maybe you go over here and take care of this right now. And there these forces of pulling me away which all of them were innocent, but the joy or the value now, this is what I decided to do.

I'm not going to let myself be pulled aside by these other things which don't have to be done right now. Let me just stay with this. And at that moment, what it was, stay with walking to this next activity that I have to do. And I could feel that that kind of put me into a kind of groove, or into a delight, or into a kind of subtleness. This is what I'm doing. So if, in the course of the day, in lay life outside of a monastery, in your life you start practising more often just being with one thing at a time, when you do it doesn't have to be all day long and continuously, but I suspect that there's a lot of room to add this into your day.

Even if you do it five per cent of the five per cent or one per cent of the activities you do through the day, you do without whole heartedness. When I'm doing this, I'm just going to do this not and have the radio on. I'm not going to TV on. I'm not going to be, you know, listening to a podcast. I'm not going to carry on a conversation. I'm not going to be thinking about things that are elsewhere, planning tomorrow when I'm cooking, when I'm sweeping the floor, when I'm brushing my teeth.

Whatever it might be doesn't be big, dramatic things. I'm going to this be the price. This is my monastery. This is a time where I'm going to give myself fully over to just this. As you do this, you might find protests. You might find your mind is impatient.

I feel, This isn't so important. I've more important things to think about and do. This can't be really. This is boring. This can't be that important. And I might as well think about more interesting things. Don't listen to those protests. If even just one per cent of the day, one per cent of the activities of the day. You give yourself over to doing just one thing. You'll have lots of time to think about, entertain yourself with other things.

But to start getting a feel for this, just being here and letting the impatience, the boredom, the resistance fall away, the powers of distraction to learn how to let them settle or be put aside, to develop that the skill and the interest, the love of just being there for one thing at a time. You'll start feeling the benefits of it. You'll start feeling the joy of it, the pleasure, the delight of it, the opening of it, the freedom that can come with that. And if you do that one per cent of the time through the day, five per cent of the time during not big, you will start developing some of the benefits that come from living a monastic life or living on retreat. Meditation retreat because one of the advantages of being in a monastery or being on a retreat is that we're reminded to bring this attention to what we're doing many more times in daily life than people are in lay life. So if you can find some way to really do one thing at a time, maybe choose certain activities through the day that those are your I don't know you are to call it your monastic activities, your Dharma activities that you do just one thing at a time, to just do this now, just brush my teeth, just whatever it might be.

So that's one way to really develop the practice and grow in it. So it's a kind of integrates with your whole life. The other thing that does the principle of practice is consistency, constancy. You just have you just have a consistent thread or some different threads that grow through your life. They are always there reliably, that you have a certain commitment to doing, that you're not going to waver from, so that a variety of benefits come up from that. And I'll use the example of meditation practice.

So to have a consistent meditation practice, it means to have a constancy, that you have

a regular, ongoing practice, that you're committed to without exception, except the house, unless the house is burning down or something. And so you would on. You know, it might be seven days a week. It might be six days a week. It's or it might be week day, a week day. You just every week day, you're going to meditate no matter what.

So there is some consistency, some commitment. Then what happens is that because you're committed to it without wavering, you get to see yourself in new ways. You get to see all the different forces inside of you, all the different debate teams that come into play, that are explaining why you shouldn't be meditating. I'm too tired. I don't have time. There's more interesting things to do. I have commitments. I'm bored or I'm excited about something else. All things are quite normal. But if the commitment, the through line, the thread that goes through you always meditate, you get to see how these forces pull you around and change what you're doing.

And you learn to let go of them for that period of meditation. Both those learnings are really powerful because unless you learn what pulls you away, left and right, away from what you're doing, you won't see how you're not free. And if you learn to let go of those who really be fully present for the meditation without letting them continue to bite at your feet, or bark at you, or insist that you should be doing different. Then you're also learning how to be free. You're learning just to be here for this. So you both learn something about yourself, and you learn the skill of letting go, to be fully here.

Also that consistency of meditating regularly. That way you get the chance to see yourself in many different ways of being. Sometimes you're happy, sometimes you're sad, sometimes you're tired, sometimes you're agitated, sometimes you're content, sometimes you're discontent, sometimes you're overwhelmed, sometimes you're underwhelmed. All these different kind of changes and ups and downs that we go through. And because you have a commitment, no matter what, whether you want to or not, you sit down to meditate, you get to see all those different ways of being, and you get to develop a different relationship to it. One way is that you learn, because you have a commitment to meditation, that you learn how to be free from giving in to any of them, or giving them too much importance, or letting them kind of influence you, and how you do and how you be.

Also learn to be more autonomous around them, or more relaxed around them, because you learn, Well, as important as they are, they're not that important compared to during this half an hour, this period of meditation. I'm just going to do my meditation. And also because of the regularity of meditation, you see these things come and go, come and go. One of the I think characteristics for many of us is that whatever we're thinking in the moment, whatever

we're feeling in the moment, we can lose perspective of the spectrum, the range of what's happening in our life—the times, all the comes and goings and the activity, the thoughts, the feelings of the moment can seem like the most important thing. But if you have just had this line through your life of meditation and you see these things come and go, one day you're happy, one day you're sad, one day you're irritated, another day you're bored, after a while you see it. Wait a minute, these things just come and go.

I don't have to take them as so absolute, or give so much authority to them, or invest myself in them. They're just like the weather that's coming through. And I don't have to be upset about the weather or get involved in the weather. I can just sit here and in the shelter of my meditation and let the weather kind of do what it does. And so we learn to do take things less personally, less reactively, and so we start becoming freer and freer and less caught by the ups and downs of our life. So this through a line of one thing, like meditating every day, can apply to this first principle, just one thing at a time.

So maybe some of the things you do through the day. I'm just going to brush my teeth. I'm just going to sweep the kitchen floor. And whenever you do that, you get because you're only doing that. It has the same benefits of just meditating every day that you see yourself in ways you'll learn how not to be pulled into the thoughts, your feelings, some of them your ruminations. You get to, in a step, out of the stuckness of our life, because here this is what I'm doing now. I'm just doing this. And if you do that consistently over days and months and years, it's a tremendous amount of learning. It can go on.

So two principles: doing one thing at a time, and doing, and being consistent in what you do. Oh, this could also be things like the precepts, having a consistency with right speech, like the Make that a theme for a year. I am going to focus on my speaking, and maybe not all day long, but there are certain places through the day, like at work or at meetings, that you talk in. Now I am going to really practise with us. Or when you first come home, remember for the first ten minutes of your home, Right Speech. So we have these practices.

As we do that, we do consistently, so we can see ourselves and the situations we're in through the vantage point of those practices, of those precepts, of what we're doing. It could be loving kindness that then we practise loving kindness for a while, and we do it consistently, and we see all the ups and downs, all the protests, all the ways we get pulled away from it, all the doubt, all the impatience. We did all kinds of things, and we get to learn, see more clearly what's happening because of the consistency of this one thing that we're doing. So I offer these. And I had this thought when I was thinking about these topics for the talk that a Sunday morning talk is like really important. That's like a really show case time for teaching the

Darmine. I have to really kind of come and show up with something profound and big and just talking about one thing at a time in consistency, just like a small thing, and, you know, not so weighty or serious or important smile that.

So that thought went through my mind for a moment something like that, and I thought to myself, No, Gil, it might seem that way, but that's a mirage. That's a trick of the mind. That this is actually huge, the important Dharma topic, hugely valuable in our lives to practise with from time to time through the day. Does that be all the time? But to practise periodically through the day. This is learning to just do one thing at a time, just do it fully. Learn what it's like to do something fully with embodied presence, with full attention, gathered in just kind of oneness with the carrot, become the carrot, become the chopping. I'm as fully there for that as you would be fully absorbed in reading a really good book, and really kind of just do this and consistency, keep it up, keep doing the practice day in and day out. I'll just keep that going.

And I'll finally end with hopefully a little inspiration around consistency, a consistency of small steps of mindfulness, tall, small movements of practice throughout the day. You pick it up and come back. Is that if you take two lines, make two lines that go off parallel for infinity, for they will never get parallel, never get further away, or closer together. I'll just be a real parallel. But if you take one of them and just gently nudge it in one direction, it can be just barely perceptible because it has a long time frame to go in distance, to go these two lines. That little almost be almost not perceptible. Different angle of one of them means that over time they get further and further and further away until the distance is huge. So there are two different lines for the trajectory of your life. There is the way you are going without practice, and the way you are going with doing practice of mindfulness and Buddhist practice. And if you can just nudge, and if there nudge other practice, one, be a little bit more, just give yourself a lot more fully to it.

You might not feel the difference today and tomorrow, next week, or even next month, but eventually the line will go off more and more and more, and the difference between just living your life as you normally do and living your life with practice. Eventually you'll see why all this has become really two different things, and you're so glad that you nudge yourself more and more in the direction of practice. So even if you nudge yourself to do one thing at a time more often and being more consistent, the line towards freedom will grow. So thank you all very much, and I am very nice to be able to share this with you.