

## *Only Your Best*

*November 10, 2017*

Years back, *Tricycle* had a feature where they would ask people different questions relating to their practice of Buddhism. One of the questions was, “How much money is enough?” And one of the answers came back as, “Money is not so much the problem. The problem is I don’t have enough time.”

Human life has always been short. Even though life expectancy is longer now, we seem to have less time than people in the past, because there are so many more things to do. The typical picture of life at work is someone on the phone talking at the same time they’re checking their e-mails, doing three or four things all at once, and still all the work doesn’t get done. This promotes an attitude of sloppiness and doing “good enough,” whatever passes, and not putting out any more effort than that.

The problem is that if you live your life that way, the attitude tends to spread to other things as well. It gets into the practice of meditation, which becomes one more thing you do while you’re multitasking. You read about people meditating while they’re jogging or they’re on their exercise machine. Everything becomes something that’s multitasked with something else. When that happens to meditation, though, you’re missing one of the important qualities—*citta*, which means giving your whole mind to this, giving your whole heart to this.

There are lots of words the Buddha uses for this quality. In the practice of mindfulness, it’s ardency. When he talks about the qualities that he brought to his awakening, it was resolution along with ardency and heedfulness, realizing that some things are more important than others, and so require your full attention, your total focus. Some dangers inside and out are more important than others, more dangerous than others. You’ve got to prepare.

The big danger, of course, is death. It may seem far away, but it’s very, very close. You look at your breath. The breath is right here. Someday it’s not going to be here, and you don’t know how many more breaths you have in the meantime. The same with your heart. It keeps ticking away, beating away, but we know that someday it’s going to stop, but you don’t know when. It’s something you really do have to prepare for.

This is one of those cases where you have to remember that things that are pressing are not necessarily important, so even though your day-to-day work may be pressing in on you, you’ve got to realize that your well-being—the well-being of your mind, the well-being of your future—is much more important than the work

that other people press on you. It's easy to forget that, which is why mindfulness is such an essential part of the practice. You remember things that are important, part of which is that you remember the long term. Sometimes you have to sacrifice things in the short term for the sake of the long term. Wisdom lies in having the right priorities as to what's important. There's that saying, "Everything worth doing is worth doing well," which is not quite the case. With some things, it's okay that you just do just good enough, so that you'll have time to do the things that are more important.

My brother, when he was getting his Master's degree in business, was shocked when he went to his first week of classes to realize that they were giving him more work than a human being could possibly do, even if that human being didn't stop to eat or sleep during the course of the semester. But he was wise enough to figure out that the professors knew what they were doing. They were making the student choose, learning to figure out what's important, what's not important, what things you have to let slide so you can focus on the really important things.

From the point of view of the Dhamma, the state of your mind is the important thing in life, because if that's spoiled, then everything else gets spoiled. You don't even have to wait for death for that to be sure. So meditation is one of those things that demands top priority and that you have to focus on doing well.

They did a study one time of people who have mastered skills, and they discovered that the main difference between people who were simply good at a skill and those who really excelled at the skill was that the ones who excelled had a strong sense of the dangers that came from not really mastering the skill and also a strong sense of the benefits that come from mastering it. So do what you can to reflect on why this is important. A visit to an old folks home can often be helpful, especially when you see people there who are not quite there anymore or incapacitated in different ways. This is what the human body does. It wears down like this. When you look at an old person like that, you've got to see: "This could be me."

That was the Buddha's reflection that got him on the path to awakening: thinking about being a young person and a healthy person, and how young people and healthy people tend to look down on old people and sick people. But he told himself, "What a minute. That's going to be me someday. This attitude of looking down is not appropriate." He wondered: Is there something that's ageless and deathless? So he set out to find it. Here he'd been raised in a very luxurious, very comfortable environment, yet he saw the dangers in it. If you don't see the danger in your comfortable environment right now, visit a place with a lot of old sick people.

I had a strong lesson in this several years back. I was Ajaan Fuang's attendant. I was around him for all those years when he was sick, and then after he died, I came back home to visit my father, who was also sick at the time. The contrast between the two was striking. My father was a very large, strong man, but the illness laid him low emotionally, even though it wasn't nearly as severe as Ajaan Fuang's. Whereas Ajaan Fuang had been training his mind so that the illness, even though it was a very strong illness, didn't conquer his mind. Seeing this really drove home the fact that the training does make a difference.

We live in a world often where doing the job just okay isn't all that different from doing it really well, but when it comes to the well-being of your mind—your ability to face aging, illness, and death, your ability to face difficult situations as they come up—there really is a difference between handling it in an okay manner and handling it really well.

So here's your chance to develop qualities of mindfulness, alertness, ardency, because it's not going to always be the case that you have the opportunity to sit here with your eyes closed and with no other responsibilities.

There's a Dhamma talk by Ajaan Fuang—one of his few Dhamma talks that was recorded—where he makes just this point. We don't know how much time we have, but we do know that we have this time. What was especially poignant about the talk was that soon after he gave that Dhamma talk, he got very sick, and only a few years after that he died. A lot of the people listening to that talk are dead as well right now. And the same can happen to us. We listen to this talk. Someday I'm going to be dead. Someday you're going to be dead. What matters is what we do in the meantime, how we use our time.

There's not that much time, so we want to divvy it up so that the time spent meditating, the time spent developing good qualities in the mind, doesn't get frittered away. It's even worse when you do have the time to practice but you're just too lazy to do it. Think about the horse and the whip. Do you want to be the kind of horse that runs only when the whip goes to the bone? Or do you want to be a little bit quicker on picking up the idea that you've got to run? Realize that running here is good: training the mind, developing good qualities that you can depend on, so when things outside start falling apart, things in the body start falling apart, you've got something in the mind that does not fall apart.

There are lots of activities in the world that don't give that many rewards, they're things you've got to do and there doesn't seem to be much reward or much difference when they're done, but this is something different. This really does make a difference. The rewards of the practice are immense, and one of the

functions of mindfulness is to keep reminding yourself of that fact, so that you give only your best when it comes to the practice.

As for other activities in life, it's useful to have at least one other activity that you also give your best to as well, to keep the habit going. For the monks, this is easier. We have more time. I remember when Ajaan Fuang was first telling me about his time with Ajaan Mun. It seemed as if Ajaan Mun was obsessed with the tiniest details, and that was because, one, as a meditating monk, you have the time, and two, it's an important part of the practice. You develop your habits in the little things you do. Even the rags that were used to wipe your feet as you went up onto his hut: Every time they got a little hole, he'd sew them up. He took care of everything.

Now, for lay people with more things pushing in on you, you can't have that kind of attention to detail in everything, but it's good to have at least one thing in addition to the meditation where you tell yourself, "I'm going to do this really well," so that it becomes a habit in the mind. Then the habit can then get transferred over into the meditation. Think of your hour here as a meditator focusing on the breath as a time to show your craft in staying with the breath, so that when you come out from the hour, you have a sense, "Okay, I did my best," because this is one of those areas where only the best will do. The state of your mind. Your ability to put up with hardship. The ability to talk yourself out of all the mind's ignorant foolishness, which is what it is: the foolish ways we make suffering for ourselves.

This skillful habit is going to become more and more crucial as aging comes, as illness comes, as death comes, and you have fewer and fewer other things to depend on. There will always be that point where the doctors have to give up. They do everything they can—assuming you've got good doctors: They do everything they can, but they can do only so much. At that point, you're on your own. So what will you have when you're on your own? That'll be a time when you really want your best, so do what you can to give your best right now.