

What Should I Do?

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One of the questions that gnaws most frequently at the mind is, “What should I do?” It goes deeper, it *eats* deeper, than questions, say, like, “Who am I? What am I?” because our identity isn’t always an issue, but we’re constantly called on to make choices as to what to do.

And that question, “What *should* I do?” implies a couple of things. One, it comes from a sense of heedfulness—the knowledge that there are dangers. The dangers can be avoided if you do the right thing, but you plow into the dangers if you don’t do the right thing.

Which means that we see that some actions are skillful and some are not. This is why the Buddha said that skillfulness comes not from any innate goodness of the mind, but from heedfulness. We look around and see how other people are handling situations in their lives and we try to notice who’s doing it well—and then we take them as our example.

Of course, right now, while you’re meditating, the answer to the question, “What should I do?” is to meditate—stay focused on the breath. You’re following one of the duties of the noble truths, which is to develop the path. But even there, there are choices.

And the choices, as the Buddha lays them out, are useful not only for when you meditate, but also when you deal with difficult issues in life—especially where you want to help someone else, but they’re resistant to your help, and you know that if they don’t take your help, they’re going to be in trouble.

The choices you have here and now are: Are you going to focus on right effort more than concentration, or concentration more than effort, or equanimity more than either? Because the practice requires all three, and it’s a matter of knowing when to emphasize which quality.

The Buddha makes a comparison with a goldsmith: Sometimes the goldsmith puts the gold in the fire, sometimes he takes it out and looks at it—he might put it in the fire again, take it out and look at it again—and then he may put it in the water to cool it down. Putting it in the fire stands for right effort—persistence. You have to *make* an effort. As the Buddha would say, “Exert a fabrication.” Change the way you breathe, change the way you talk to yourself, change the perceptions you’re holding in mind, and the feelings you’re focused on—to get rid of unskillful qualities and bring skillful qualities more to the fore.

Equanimity is when you look at it to see how things are going. Notice that the equanimity is there to gauge how things are going. It's not to be indifferent; it's not to say, "I don't care." You look *because* you care, but there are times you realize that's all you can do—just look, watch. Especially when things are uncertain in the mind. So, you watch for a while. Even when you stay with the breath, sometimes you can't figure out what to do with the breath, so you just watch it. Tell yourself, "Let the breath breathe on its own." You're not going to interfere, and that way you may see something you hadn't seen before.

The third activity, cooling the gold in water, stands for getting the mind in concentration. Having a sense of ease, a sense of fullness, a sense of refreshment: That's your nourishment on the path and it cools the fires of the mind.

You need all three. As the Buddha said, if you simply exert effort, the mind breaks down. If you simply watch, the mind doesn't get into concentration. If you simply get into concentration and just stay there, things don't develop. The practice is simply a matter of learning how to balance these things out.

The same principle applies to issues outside: You do what you can. You try to figure out, "What is the skillful approach here?" Then, when you run up against resistance, you step back to observe—that's when you exercise equanimity. And remember, equanimity in this case is realizing that everybody has his or her own karma, and there's only so much we can do for other people. But simply watching is not going to be sustaining for the mind—that's why we need the concentration, to have a place where you can be at ease.

And fostering this sense of ease inside is not selfish: You're strengthening yourself, so that when issues do come up, you'll be stronger for dealing with them. Because there's only so much we can do to prepare for the future, and there's a lot that's beyond our control right now. But you want to make sure that your mind is not beyond your control. This is why we have to strengthen it beforehand, so that when things fall apart, as they sometimes will, *you* don't fall apart. You're there, you're strong, you're alert, you're mindful. All the good qualities you developed from the concentration can be brought to bear.

In this way, you prepare. Remember the Buddha's instructions to the monks going to the forest, when he talks about future dangers: aging can come, illness can come—all kinds of dangers can come, society can break down. So now, while you're strong and have the opportunity, develop the qualities of mind you'll need so that when things break down, you don't have to suffer. When you're not suffering, you're in a much better position to see, in the present moment, what needs to be done. You're much better at picking up the pieces when *you're* not falling to pieces.

And you have to remember that uncertainty and anxiety are hindrances. So if you focus on worrying about the future, ask yourself, “Is there something I can do?” If there is something you can do, go ahead and do it; if there’s not, you realize, okay, that’s beyond you—you have to step back.

As the Buddha once said, one of the signs of wisdom is knowing which duties fall to you, and which duties don’t fall to you. Completely changing the world, arranging the world, controlling the world is not one of your duties. Being prepared to help when your help is needed: That *is* one of your duties. And that’s something you can prepare for right now.

That thought brings you back here, working on your concentration, trying to bring it into balance so that your mindfulness is strong, your alertness is sharp. The sense of ease and well-being that you gain from being right here can provide you with nourishment, can strengthen you, so that as you meditate, you’re being responsible, both in creating a refuge for yourself and becoming someone the people around you can depend on, too.

We live in a very undependable world, and trained people are few and far between. When you prepare the mind in this way, the question, “What should I do?” doesn’t eat away at you so much. You have more confidence that in training the mind, you’re doing the right thing. After all, the Buddha said that one of his duties as a responsible teacher was to give people a sense of what they should do and how to figure out what they should do on their own.

And even have the idea that there is a *should* there: There are so many teachings out there saying that there are no shoulds, just do what you want. But that attitude is irresponsible, heedless. It creates a lot of danger.

The whole purpose of the Buddha’s teachings was to create safety and confidence, so that even though we live in an uncertain world where lots of things are beyond our control, we can get our minds under control. And in that way, we’re making a positive contribution, both to ourselves and to the people around us.