

# *The Most Important Thing to Be Doing*

*April 15, 2016*

Try to gather all your attention right here, right here at your present awareness, your awareness of the breath. And do what you can to keep any outliers from wandering away and unraveling your concentration.

You've got to remind yourself that this is the most important thing you can be doing right now. As far as you're concerned, this is the most important thing in the world: getting your mind trained, getting the mind to settle down, so that it has a sense of well-being and is able to see itself clearly—so that it can take care of business inside.

Empires rise and fall, but the mind remains. That's got to be your perspective. Because the mind remains not only through the death of the body but through many, many cycles of the Universe. So you've got to get it into good shape, because otherwise it's going to take you to weird places, undesirable places. If it's in good shape, you can go to good places. And you do that by making a good place right here to begin with. It's by tuning into the possibilities for peace and well-being right now that you also tune into the possibilities for peace and well-being in other places in the cosmos.

But as for where you're going or when, put that all aside. It's *right now* that's important, because this is where the work can be done, seeing what's going on in your mind.

If you go into thoughts about the past and the future, it's like watching a play. You're sitting in the audience and you see the effect that the acting has and you can see the pull that it has to get involved in the story and to believe that it's really real. But the present moment is where you can get behind the scenes, get backstage, and see how they create those effects, so that you begin to see through them.

You start thinking about the extent to which your thoughts can determine your actions, and the way your thoughts have led you in good and bad places in the past without much pattern. You want to give some pattern to your thoughts. In other words, turn them into a path, the path that leads to the end of suffering.

This is something you have to do on your own. After all, no one else can experience your suffering. This is something each of us has that's really our own. Other people can see the outside effects, perhaps, but there's a lot that nobody else can see. You can't take your pain out and show it to other people.

When they do analyses of levels of happiness and levels of pain, they have to ask you, “On a scale of 1 to 10, where is your happiness right now? Where’s your pain?” And who knows where your 1 is, who knows where your 10 is, as compared to somebody else’s? You can’t take them out and compare them. So you think about all the numbers that are generated in those kinds of studies and of course you realize: It’s garbage in, garbage out.

Fortunately, the solution of this problem lies inside as well—because the cause lies inside, too. The Buddha identifies the cause as the craving that leads to becoming. And notice he doesn’t say physical pain leads to suffering or that disappointment leads to suffering. He says it’s the craving, the clinging that lead to the suffering. Those are things that happen within. Which means that it’s within your power to change the cause of suffering into the path to the end of suffering.

If the cause of suffering were something outside, it’d be beyond your control. After all, other people have their freedom of choice and can do what they want. The world has its ways of changing all the time. If it were the real cause of suffering, the suffering that eats into the mind, then there wouldn’t be much hope.

But here the cause is inside. So you want to see that. And it’s right here that you see it. Now to see that, you’re going to be seeing some things you don’t like about yourself. That’s why we work on concentration, to get the mind to settle down and have a sense of well-being. You soothe the mind with the breath.

The question often arises, “How much concentration do you need?” The Buddha talks about different levels of jhana, as he calls them, but we’re not here to focus on jhana, we’re here to focus on our breath. There’s no jhan-o-meter than can measure whether you’ve gone over the threshold to how much concentration is needed. What you know is that when you get the mind still enough, with a sense of well-being, you like being here. That’s the important thing.

So if the breath isn’t the way you like it, change the breath. Or if the mind’s not willing to settle down with the breath right now, there are other topics you can think about that’ll get it more and more inclined to want to settle down. Then you can bring it back to the breath.

This is one of the reasons why we have those chants at the beginning for reflecting on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. If you know much about the Buddha, you can think about his life, what an inspiring life it was: how inspiring his example was in going out and putting his life on the line to find the very skill that we’re practicing right now. And when he came back from his awakening, he didn’t charge money for his teaching. All he asked was that people

be honest and observant in looking into their own hearts and minds to see where they were causing themselves suffering and be willing to take on his teachings and give them a fair try.

You can think about the Dhamma itself, or you can think about the Sangha, the people who've followed the Buddha's teachings and realized that, Yes, awakening is possible. They've brought that tradition down to us here in the present moment.

Sometimes thinking about these things can get the mind in the right mood to settle down.

We also have the contemplation of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. Sometimes thinking about those attitudes, extending them to all people, can help the mind to settle down.

There's also contemplation of aging, illness, and death, to remind you that this really is serious business. Death does pose dangers. Aging, illness: They all pose dangers to the mind. Because if we're not skilled, we can take these things and turn them into a lot of suffering. This is why we have to focus on the craving, the clinging, that can turn *anything* into suffering.

When you think about these things for a while, it brings you back to the present moment. Because the work that needs to be done is done right here, and it's best done when the mind is calmed down right here. There are issues out there in the world that can get you all stirred up, but it's good to think about these recollections so that you can put everything into perspective—so that you can realize that training the mind, getting the mind to settle right down, is the most important thing you can be doing right now.

If you think about your responsibilities outside, ask yourself: What kind of mind state will handle those responsibilities best? A mind that's calm and clear and stable: That's the kind of mind you want to create right now. So even though you may have other jobs you have to work on, other things you have to think about, this is not the time for that. This is the time to get the mind in good shape, so that it can think properly and do those jobs properly when the appropriate time comes.

So *this* breath is important, your awareness of this breath is important, as is your ability to understand how to get the breathing to be comfortable so that the mind likes to stay here.

Once there's a sense of ease in the breath, how do you allow that sense of ease to spread through the body? If you push it or stretch it too much, it's not going to be ease anymore. Think of it spreading like a liquid, or like a cloud, seeping through all the parts of the body. There may be some parts that are resistant, so

don't push it against those too much. Because, again, when you start pushing ease, it's not ease. Think of it seeping in—and hold in mind the perception that the parts of the body that seem to be resistant are porous. Allow that ease to permeate, to settle in, and you're sitting here surrounded by that sense of ease. If you have a sense of the blood flow through the body, allow that to feel easeful as well. In other words, you're trying to create a sensation here that the mind can settle into, where it feels secure, feels soothed on all sides.

This way, you can begin to comprehend what the mind is doing that creates unnecessary suffering for itself. We all want happiness, we all want well-being, everything we do is for the sake of well-being, and yet we end up creating some ill-being instead. And we want to see why that is. What's the ignorance that causes that? Well, the Buddha says part of that is that you don't comprehend exactly what the suffering is.

The word “comprehension” is used in two contexts: one properly and one not. In the context of right mindfulness, the texts use the word *sampajañña*, which some people translate as clear comprehension. But actually it's alertness. You want to be alert to what you're doing; you want to be alert to what the causes are. Now, alertness is something you do want to develop so that you can comprehend: What's the suffering? That's where the word comprehension is properly used. The duty with regard to the suffering and stress in the mind is that you want to comprehend it. First that means seeing what it is.

There's been a lot of misinformation that the Buddha said, “Life is suffering.” He never said that. He said something very specific: Suffering is the clinging to the aggregates—things like feelings and perceptions and thought-constructs. We cling to these things, we keep doing them over and over again: That's what “clinging” means for the mind. We cling to things and then we feed on them, we seem to need them. We go running after a lot of pleasures that contain a lot of clinging and craving, and then we wonder why the pleasure isn't satisfying. Well, the pleasure contains the clinging that really is stressful, really is suffering. But in our drive to go for what we want, we tend to turn a blind eye to it and don't recognize it.

This is what we have to comprehend: Exactly where in our ways of feeding on life, feeding on our surroundings, is the clinging? Exactly what causes us to go for these things? Where's the appeal?

To see this, you have to get the mind really still, and then start asking the right questions. In other words, “Where's the suffering? Where's the cause? What can I do to see it more clearly? What can I do to let go of the cause more effectively?” Try to get the mind into a position where it can actually ask these questions and

start seeing some of its ignorance peel away, fall away, as you begin to realize, “Oh, this is what I’m doing. And I don’t have to.”

These are all terms that are used in the texts, but they’re meant to be very, very relevant to what you’re doing in a very immediate sense, as close to your awareness as possible.

There’s a pun they have in Thai where they talk about how practicing the Dhamma is basically practicing yourself. The word “practice” there in Thai can also mean looking after something or looking after another person. So when you’re practicing the Dhamma you’re looking after yourself. You’re taking care of this big issue inside you.

And notice, the Buddha never says, “Well, you just have to learn how to put up with suffering because you should devote your life to other people.” He says the best way of practicing is to clear up the problem inside and then you’re in a much better position to help others. Because if you’re suffering from ignorance, and you’re trying to help other people to stop suffering from ignorance, it’s not going to work. Take care of your immediate problem right here.

And it is important. That’s the Buddha’s gift to you, saying, “Yes, your suffering does matter.” He was earnest enough to find the way out, and he hopes that you’re earnest enough to take his teachings and put them to good use.