

The Joy of Monotasking

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Focus on one task—getting the mind to stay with the breath. We live in a society that values multitasking, but often when you do many tasks all at once, none of them gets very well done. And when we do many things all at once, we miss out on a lot. People who multitask and say that they get the tasks done just as well as if they were working on one task at a time are like people with brain damage who say that their brain is fine, because as far as they can tell, it's okay. But their powers of judgment are limited, so they can't be relied on to really judge how well the task is done.

The same principle applies with being with the breath. If you're trying to do too many things at once, you can't really judge how well you're doing. If you're with the breath and with something else and with something else and with something else, you don't really know how well any of those are being done. There's a lot to be learned by focusing on one thing at a time. You see things more clearly. Your powers of judgment are better, and the joy that comes from doing it is also increased. There are some ways of finding joy in life that come from gaining certain things: the joys of gaining nice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. That's one kind of joy. But then there's the joy of doing things well, and that comes only when you focus on doing one task at a time.

In our life here at the monastery, we try to minimize the number of tasks that people have, but there are still a number of things we have to do. After all, we're human beings with bodies, with needs that have to be looked after, but the tasks related to those needs can be done in a single-minded way, with a sense of wanting to do them well. When you're doing many tasks at a time, you're basically trying to dispose of them, get them out of the way, but here we're learning to do tasks and learning how to savor them: This is what it's like to sweep well. This is what it's like to clean things up well. This is what it's like to cook well. This is what it's like to do whatever well. There's a joy that comes from that, and in the practice, this is the kind of joy that we focus on—the joy that comes from doing.

Look at the various passages where the Buddha talks about the ways of generating joy. They involve not only doing things but also being conscious of what you're doing, being alert to what you're doing. The joy that comes from generosity: When you focus on your motivation, realize that your motivation is a good thing, and it's good to have that good motivation in mind and to act on it. Learn to savor that.

The same with the joy that comes from observing the precepts, being virtuous: You look back on your behavior and you realize there's no reason for remorse, and that lack of remorse becomes a source of joy.

The joy that comes from abandoning the hindrances: You see that the mind had sensual desire, and you were able to get past it. It had ill will. You were able to get past that. And so on down the line: sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty. When as these things come in the mind, you recognize that they are a hindrance and that you want to get rid of them: That's half the battle right there. Then you learn the various techniques for thinking your way around them. You get a greater sense of mastery over your own mind. There's a joy that comes from that as well.

So what are the tasks you're engaged in? From the very simple things like cleaning the place up to the practice of meditation, focus on what you're doing. Focus on doing it well, because these activities have a purpose, and one of the purposes is to cultivate a sense of joy that's conducive to getting the mind to settle down.

We had a visitor here recently who'd been to some other monasteries, and he noted that the other places they have signs all over the place saying, "Do this, do that, wash your cup, put it back in its place, put the broom here." They had a work monk who goes around with a clipboard telling everybody what to do. Whereas here things are more voluntary. There's a corner that hasn't been swept. You might see that it needs to be swept, and you realize, okay, here's a chance to make some merit. Here's a chance to do something well, do something good. Or if you see that someone else has swept it already, you realize they didn't do it because they were told to do it. They did it because they wanted to. That creates a better sense of joy in the community—but the joy is there primarily when you're well focused.

So these are jobs not to get out of the way or to dispose of. They're jobs to be done, opportunities to do good, to do well. Notice the combination there: You do good and you do well. You do something that's good for everybody and you do it well, and there's a joy that comes with that. There's a greater alertness, and as you focus on doing something well, it develops your powers of judgment. The idea that people who practice the Dhamma should not be passing judgment has almost no basis at all in the Canon. There's one passage where the Buddha does say not to try to measure the attainments of other people. If you do, you harm yourself. But aside from that, he says you *have* to judge: What kind of person do you want to be? What kind of person do you want to emulate?

There's a section in one of the suttas where the Buddha talks about having a sense of people, having a sense of individuals, and it's basically knowing to judge what kind of person is better than another kind of person. The person who wants to listen to the Dhamma is better than one who doesn't want to listen. One who listens carefully is better than one who doesn't listen carefully. One who tries to remember the Dhamma, one who tries to explore the Dhamma, one who has actually practiced the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma: These are all people who are better than those who don't. Even when you're practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, those who practice for their own benefit and for the benefit of others are better than someone who practices only for his or her own benefit.

So there are gradations. There are areas where you should pass judgment, primarily so that you can figure out what kind of a person you want to be. A good way of learning how to pass judgment is to look at your own behavior and see what you can do to improve it. That requires that you focus on doing as few things at a time as possible, so that you can see clearly what you're actually doing. Then you can judge whether you're doing it well.

So there's a joy in monotasking. There's a lot to be learned. That, too, is a source of joy, that you're learning things, gaining good qualities. You're not just here to make sure that the monastery is neat, but you're gaining good qualities of mind as you do it. These qualities of mind then transfer over into the meditation, because when you sit down with your eyes closed and you focus on the breath, there are no signs there telling you what to do. It's up to you to have a sense of what works and what doesn't.

Remember Ajaan Lee's analogy: We're working on a skill here, like learning how to weave a basket or to make clay tiles. You learn from the object you're dealing with, and you learn best when you're focused on what you're doing. Otherwise, you have no way of making any connections. If you were sewing a shirt but not paying careful attention to the thread going through the machine or the way the needle is going into the cloth, then when the shirt comes out and doesn't look right, you don't know exactly where to make a change, because you can't remember what you did. But if you pay careful attention to what you're doing, then you know: "This led to that, and that led to this, and the results were not good, so I'm going to go back and change this and that."

So monotasking has lots of rewards. It has its purpose. It helps the mind calm down, helps you see things more clearly. All the qualities of concentration and discernment get developed in focusing full attention on what you're doing and on doing it well—and learning how to appreciate the goodness that comes from that

activity, the joy that comes from mastering a skill. That joy then becomes your food on the path, so that everything you're doing becomes part of the practice, and you can find joy in all those things as well.