

Getting the Most Out of the Present

October 19, 2018

When we meditate, we try to bring our minds into the present moment. We don't take the present moment as our goal. It's part of the path. Being mindful, getting the mind concentrated on the breath: That's all path. And the whole point of the path, as the Buddha said, is that it's going to bear fruit. So, how do you get the most out of the present moment so that it bears the best fruit?

When the Buddha talks about being in the present, many times it's in the context of death contemplation: realizing that there's work to be done and we don't know how much time we have left to do it. The mind needs to be straightened out and how much longer we'll have to do that, we don't know. But we do know that we have right now. So, thinking about the present moment is a lesson in heedfulness. The Buddha says there are duties to be done right now. Of course, the duties here refer to the duties of the four noble truths. To what extent have we yet to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation, or develop the path? That's something we have to take stock of, and then figure out what has to be done right now.

Right now you're trying to develop the path. As for anything that would pull you off the path, think of that as something to be abandoned. This is why it's important to know how to relate to the past, because some parts of the past are relevant to what you're doing right now, and some are not. This is what mindfulness is for: to remember.

When you've meditated on the breath before, how did you get good results? Try to relax around the breath. Don't make the meditation too much of a chore. Think of it as an opportunity to breathe easy. Each breath is another opportunity to breathe easy. When the mind can rest a bit, then it can look at itself more clearly. So whatever lessons you've learned on how to let the mind rest with the breath and let that sensation of resting spread out: Remember them.

Then, of course, there will be a lot of other things from the past coming up that are not really relevant right now. Those are things you want to put aside.

Particularly you may start thinking of things you've done in the past. It's very easy when the mind is quiet for these things to intrude: things that you've done that you're not all that happy about, that you feel embarrassed about, sometimes you even feel ashamed about. You think of how much of your life you've frittered away with one thing or another.

In terms of the really unskillful things you've done in the past, the Buddha said that the right attitude is to remember they're in the past. Going back and digging them up right now is not going to help, unless you find that you can learn a lesson about how not to repeat that mistake. But remorse is not going to help get rid of the problem. He also says that it's very unskillful to think that "My past karma is going to come and get me sometime." Karma is a lot more fluid than that. The best you can do is to remind yourself that was a mistake: "I don't want to repeat it."

Then spread lots of goodwill: goodwill for yourself, goodwill for the people you've harmed, goodwill for everybody all around. Otherwise, if you sit here berating yourself about things you've done in the past, it weakens the mind, and when the mind is weak it's likely to do more unskillful things in the future. So, goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others—remind yourself, "I don't want to commit that mistake again" —and then you get back to what you're doing right now.

Because we're sitting now with our eyes closed, the duty right now is to develop the concentration. Sometimes a craving comes up and you can let it go. Suffering comes and you can begin to try to analyze it. That's what the Buddha said, what you have to do with pain and suffering is to comprehend it.

What is the suffering? There are so many different sensations and ideas that all get glommed together when the mind is in pain. And you have to figure out, where exactly is the pain? The Buddha lists all kinds of ordinary things that we can suffer over—aging, illness, death, separation—but then his conclusion is really unusual. He says the suffering is in the clinging. Suffering is an activity, something that we actively *do*. In the midst of all those unpleasant sensations, there is the activity of clinging, and that's where the real suffering is. If we can find that, ferret it out, and ask ourselves, "Why are we clinging?" we have a chance to see the

craving that underlies it, and then we can let the craving go.

So anything that comes up that burdens the mind, you might ask yourself, “Exactly where is the clinging in here?” And don’t let yourself get waylaid by uncomfortable sensations, because those are not the real suffering. The real suffering is in the clinging, something you have to ferret out if you’re going to be able to identify what the craving is that goes behind it. Only then can you let it go.

So these are the duties we do right now as we’re meditating, but we won’t be sitting here with our eyes closed all the time. As we go through life, we’ll find there are other duties that we have to take care of, but we can still see them as part of the duties of the noble truths.

In particular, whatever goodness you may want to develop in terms of generosity, virtue, all the qualities that are called perfections: Those are things you develop. That’s the duty there, and in that way your life away from formal practice is not wasted. We have only so much time, but we also have duties that are imposed on us, either from outside or things we’ve taken on of our own accord. You have to ask yourself in any given situation: “What is the goodness I can develop here? What is the unnecessary suffering I’m imposing on myself around this duty? What am I holding onto that’s making it hard?”

Years back, when I was at Wat Dhammasathit, I was working on a translation of Ajaan Lee. I’d be working away, and all of a sudden Ajaan Fuang would get sick and so I’d have to drop the translation. I found that I was suffering unnecessarily because I really wanted to get that translation done, and Ajaan Fuang’s illness became an obstacle. Then I finally realized that that was not the real obstacle. The real obstacle was the clinging to the project I wanted to finish. I had other duties at that time, and I had to learn how to let go of the things I was clinging to, if I was going, one, do the duty well, and two, not suffer from it.

So when you find you have a duty and you’re suffering from it, ask yourself, “What’s the problem? Where’s the real problem?” Learn how to ferret that out, and you’ll find that you can do the duty much better, and you develop good qualities of mind.

There are a lot of things in the world that need to be done but are not getting done because people don’t like to do them. If you find something like that,

remind yourself: Here's your chance to do something good. Nobody's going to compete with you for it, and you have the satisfaction of realizing that something that had to be done, got done. And you were able to develop good qualities of the mind at the same time: determination, persistence, endurance, truthfulness, goodwill for the people who'd benefit from getting the duty done, equanimity toward the things that you'd rather be doing. You realize that you can't have your druthers all the time. When you can think in this way, then everything in life becomes a part of the practice. None of your time is wasted.

Our problem is that we squander our time, even though we may not have much left. In this regard, older people are sometimes better off than younger people. Older people know they don't have much time left. Sometimes younger people don't have much time left either, but they don't know. There's that assumption that a normal lifespan is so long, but who knows? There's no guarantee that the older people go first. So remember that we all have only a little time, and there's a lot to be done—primarily inside the mind, but there are other duties outside as well. Each of us will have to develop a sense of priorities as to what really needs to be done and how to make the most of a Dhamma lesson—how to make a Dhamma profit out of it, you might say.

Sounds a little materialistic, but then the Buddha himself used the word “noble wealth” and used images of wealth with regard to qualities of the mind many times in his teachings. Goodwill, he said, is a form of wealth, as are conviction and a sense of shame—the sense that certain actions are beneath you. That's a form of wealth. Compunction, the attitude that's not apathetic about the results of your actions that really does want to do things well; virtue, learning, right-effort: These things are forms of wealth that we develop inside. These are the things that we can get out of the present moment if we use the present well.

Remember: It's here to be used. It's not here just to hang out with the idea that, well, this is what it's all about and this is all we have to do, just be in the present moment. That's *abusing* the present moment: hiding away from your responsibilities, hiding away from your duties, hiding away from things that you really could get done, that would be to your benefit and the benefit of others. Regard the present moment as a means to an end, and then squeeze all the

goodness you can out of it.

As in Ajaan Maha Boowa's recommendation as people getting older: He said that even though there are certain things you used to do with the body but you can't do anymore, still there's a lot of goodness you can squeeze out of this body before you have to give it back. Find where it is, and give it a good squeeze. That's the profit you can gain if you use the present moment well.