

Dharmette: Doing One Thing at a Time

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 28, 2010

I want to say a few more words about doing one thing at a time. The practice of meditation and mindfulness that we do mostly has its origin in the monastic community. Occasionally people think, “Oh, I think I’d like to go off and live in a monastery for a while,” or “I’m living a lay life and I can’t quite benefit as well from this practice as someone who is a monk or a nun.” One of the qualities that makes monastic life so supportive of practice is that there are more opportunities to do just one thing at a time. And if you would like to get some of the benefits of being a monastic without being a monastic, then throughout the day, when you’re doing something, give yourself over to doing just that one thing. Look for opportunities to just do one thing.

This can take many different forms. For example, if you’re going from your kitchen to your laundry area to put the clothes from the washing machine into the dryer, just do that. Walk from the kitchen to the laundry area – just do that. Decide, “This is what I’m going to do” – as opposed to: starting to walk there and then noticing that the dishes need to be put away, or that maybe it’s time

to go and check the mail. It's so easy to get pulled left and right. Just do that one thing. If you set yourself a course, to get to your laundry area, just do that. Maybe make sure your phone is off, so you're not going to be distracted.

Or it could be that when you pick up a pot, you pick it up with both hands, so you're really there with you and the pot. When I was in the monastery in Japan I was berated by the other monks for picking up the rice pot with only one hand. I thought you just pick it up and carry it into the dining area. "Gil when you pick up the rice pot, you pick it up with two hands." If you give your whole body, with both hands, over to that one activity, then you're really doing it, that one thing. What I found was if I do it with one hand, part of me is not really involved. I'm not really giving myself over to do that one activity fully. I learned from Zen training that if you do it with both hands, more of you is connected, involved, more fully present.

One of the advantages of doing one thing at a time is that you'll start noticing all the ways that you want to do more than one thing at a time. You'll start noticing all the impulses to try to do other things, or to get it over quickly so you can go onto the next thing. When you do one thing fully, you're not really even concerned about finishing it. Just do this one thing. Wash your dishes. "Okay I'm here to wash the dishes, it doesn't matter how

long it takes, I'm going to give myself over to it." If you're thinking about the next thing, then you're not doing one thing. You're doing two things: the dishes and what you're thinking about next.

One of the things that you'll discover, when you do one thing, is you start noticing all the forces inside of you that want to do more than one thing. "This is not good enough. It has to be done better. There are other things to do that are more important. The grass is greener somewhere else. This can't really count. This can't be a spiritual practice. Walking to my laundry room? That's not really where spirituality is. I have to come to a special place like IMC." All these beliefs, and thoughts, and reactions come into place. There are a variety of thoughts that might arise that keep you at a distance from what you're doing. You might be doing it, but you're not really doing it.

I remember when I was taking a painting class in college, Introduction to Painting. I'd never painted before, and one of the big lessons that the teacher had for me was, "Gil, when you paint, you should be more committed to the canvas; do more with the paint brush." I was just ever so lightly dabbling, kind of poking at the canvas [laughs]. Just put that brush in there [laughs]. But I was afraid – afraid of the consequence of painting – so I wasn't giving myself over to the painting. There may be aversion or fear or desire. There may be all

kinds of things operating that keep us from really being fully in the activity we're doing. We hold ourselves back. One of the things to discover is how we hold ourselves back.

Or you might discover that, because you give yourself over fully to an activity, maybe you give yourself into it too much. Maybe you're pushing too hard to make something happen. There's all this extra desire, and ambition, and expectations that are involved in trying too hard – wanting too much to get something out of it.

Doing one thing at a time allows something to relax, because often the stresses we feel in our day come not from the particular activity we're doing in and of itself, but from all the other things we're thinking we have to do. There's a lot of extra that we add on top of our life. And to allow yourself to just do one thing simply, fully – to have one activity – hopefully, you can shed a lot of thoughts and concerns that are not about that one activity. My suggestion to you is that probably a great percentage of the stress you experience in your day has to do with that extra. It has nothing to do with the one activity.

So you're cooking. If you're really there for that cooking, and you can let go of anything that has nothing to do with the cooking, chances are yet it's quite a pleasant experience, and it will be relaxing to do. But if you're

concerned about getting the food out quickly, or getting it over with quickly, or paying your taxes, or all kinds of other things that have nothing to do with the cooking, then it's easy to build up distress. And this is very important because your heart is really precious.

One of the great tasks, I think, of any spiritual life is to find some way to let your heart get settled, to relax, open up, and have a time and place in your life. The more we do multi-tasking, the more likely it is that the heart gets lost and forgotten. It doesn't get noticed. But if you do one thing at a time and you can relax in that one thing, chances are that your heart begins to come forth and show itself.

So if you're interested in taking what you learn in meditation and extending it out into your daily life more, make it a richer, more integral part of your daily life, a simple way to do that would be to find more opportunities to do one thing at a time. Driving, turn off the radio. If you like to have the radio on when you drive, you're doing two things. If you're talking on the phone while you're driving, you could do that for sure, but you lose an opportunity to have driving be just one thing in a relaxing way. It doesn't sound that relaxing to talk on the phone and drive at the same time. It's a qualitatively different kind of experience.

Look at the situations in your life where you multi-task, and compare what happens if you multi-task versus if you “uni-task.” Experiment a little bit, and see if it’s to your advantage, to your benefit, to do one thing at a time more often than you do now.