

The Dharmic Life (5 of 5) One Thing at a Time

June 18, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

simple, simplicity, simplify, daily life, washing, dishes, driving, boredom, dishwasher, monastery, sustain, Zen, students, walks, sits, works

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This may be the last talk in the five-part series on the Dharma life, although perhaps all talks are about the Dharma life. I like the idea that a spiritual life is also a lived life. A life that, in Dharma terms, is infused with mindfulness, awareness, and intentionality – a certain orientation towards radical non-harming of oneself and others. It is something you bring to all of your life.

It is such a wonderful privilege to have the opportunity to live a dharmic, contemplative life – where we infuse our daily life with spiritual practice. That we can do this with our lives is a wonderful honor.

It is easy to want to live a dharmic life but hard to remember to do. Rather than having a high standard –

like you are supposed to be mindful nonstop throughout the whole day – you will benefit tremendously by just increasing the percentage of your attention to life. I suspect that if 10% of the day you were mindful of what you are doing, that day would transform your life in big ways.

Today I want to offer another practice or approach you can take to infuse your daily life with a sense of practice. When you do something, just do that one thing – practice doing one thing at a time. In a world where multitasking is a common expression, we may not respect single-tasking as much. But, to be present for one thing. When you are doing something, really be there for it.

Why is that useful? It is what we are trying to do when we meditate. We are trying to be present for what is happening in the moment – being here for one thing at a time. We might switch and be aware of something else a moment later, but the idea is to be here for whatever is happening. In that process, we learn how easily we are distracted. We learn how easily we are bored, caught in desires or aversion to what is happening, or caught in preferences and fantasies.

We have to learn to work with the mind that gets all entangled in things – to begin shedding those things, not letting them get in the way. We learn somehow in

meditation to be simpler. We learn to relax deeply and get in touch with ourselves in a much deeper way than when we are spinning in preferences, desires, aversions, and distractions. Remembering to come home to ourselves – to be here in a deeply intimate, connected way – that comes from having a somewhat simple mind. Not a simplistic mind, but a mind that is not caught up in many things.

A benefit of meditation is feeling that simplicity and non-distractibility of the mind – just being here for this moment. We learn so much about ourselves in that process. We learn what makes us tick. We learn what to let go of. We learn what it is like to peacefully connect to ourselves in a wonderful way.

We can do the same with simple things in daily life that allow for doing one thing at a time. Have it be the same as with meditation. If you are washing the dishes, just wash the dishes. Do not also have the news on because you want to be efficient – like: “While I am washing dishes, I might as well listen to the news. Dishes are mindless and have no great value.” Instead, infuse washing dishes with the same kind of attention, purpose, and practice as you do in meditation – just wash the dishes.

Maybe you get bored. Learn to work with that and let go of it. Sometimes boredom means that you are holding

yourself apart from the experience. Can you give yourself more to the experience? Just washing the dishes – just you and the dishes. Wash with both hands, with your whole body present there.

That kind of focus and attention will certainly reveal all the ways the mind wants to escape and do something else. In the process, you will learn how to quiet the mind and let go of those preoccupations. You will learn how to simplify the mind. You will experience the benefits – the intimacy and “coming-home-ness” – of being here for one thing.

We can apply that to all kinds of things we do – cooking, cleaning, driving. Just drive. Driving involves many different senses and considerations. The mind moves around, looking – rearview mirror, side mirror, front. Just do what driving requires of you. Do not also have the radio on or talk on the phone. If you want to get the benefits of having the practice grow in your daily life – just do that one thing.

Some people will complain and say: “Well, I have a lot to do. I need to multitask.” That may be so – please do it if that is necessary. But sometimes things are done more efficiently if you do one thing at a time. If you do it properly the first time, you do not have to do it again. You do it fully so you do not have to come back to it

later. You understand it fully – “just this,” “just this.”

One advantage of monastic life is that you are given different tasks throughout the day, where doing one thing at a time is what is called for. Raking the temple grounds – just rake. Or washing dishes. I was a dishwasher in the monastery my first summer there. I spent time where it was just me and the dishwashing machine. Rather than washing in the sink, I had this wonderful dance of completely being in the dishwashing shack. It was vigorous and active work. It was not calm and relaxed. But, for me, it was beautiful – a dance of putting dishes in and away and washing. I gave myself over to what was needed.

Doing one thing at a time does not mean that we do everything slowly. Although, sometimes that is delicious and very helpful to do. We do it at a pace that is useful. Sometimes doing one thing fully means we give ourselves over in a very full and active way.

After the monastery, I worked as a line cook in a very busy restaurant. I did a lot of different things. In a sense, I multitasked – cooking different dishes at the same time and tracking them. But that is all I did. I was completely absorbed in and concentrated on what I was doing. I would leave work feeling more relaxed than when I came in because I gave myself over to that one activity.

If you are protesting a little, you might experiment with doing one thing at a time – to find out whether that provides more ease and relaxation. Then you may not have to spend as much time afterward relaxing.

Relaxing is wonderful. But if you do not need to relax, you can continue living your life in a nice way.

Also, when you do one thing at a time, sustain and follow through with it to the end. Many years ago, I left the monastery and lived in a house. While going from one end of the house to the other, like to the laundry area, I discovered how easy it was to get distracted by little tasks that I stopped to do. Then it took me a while to get to the laundry area. So if the purpose is to go to the laundry area, it is nice to just go there.

The body and mind get a sense of what it is like to do one thing at a time – not bounce around or be busy, not grab at everything that comes up. If you set yourself up to do something, sustain and follow through with it – unless something important comes up, of course. Follow through so you can give yourself the pleasure and joy of just doing one thing.

For practitioners, it is more than experiencing pleasure and joy. It is doing the same exploration of our inner life as we do in meditation. We are learning to let go of what does not serve us – what is unhealthy. We are learning to wake up to the present moment. We are learning to

have some continuity with doing that. That continuity is so beneficial. Continuity is what allows the Dharma life to unfold and deepen.

So I end this five-part series with something I think, in principle, is quite simple. Yesterday's talk was more complicated – the idea of intention, commitment, a sense of purpose, why we do things. Today I brought it back to the value of something ordinary and simple. I hope almost anyone can do it. It does not take a lot of intelligence. It does not take a lot of sophistication. When you are doing something, just do it. Do it fully.

I will end with a story of two Zen students. This is how the story was told to me. Two Zen students were praising their teachers. One of them said: "Oh, my teacher is so wonderful. He has all these psychic powers. He can fly through the air and walk on water." The other student said: "Oh, my teacher is great too because when she walks, she just walks – when she sits, she just sits – when she works, she just works." The first student said, "Oh, your teacher is really great – now *that* is wonderful."

So, walk when you walk, sit when you sit, clean when you clean, talk with friends when you talk. This is a great power. Giving yourself carefully to each thing you do – is a gift to the world. Thank you.