

# *Satipaṭṭhāna* (22) Doing One Thing at a Time

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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We are staying with the third exercise that the Buddha taught in the “Discourse on the Four Foundations for Awareness.” It is easy to overlook this exercise because these four foundations are often taught as meditation practices. People will focus on the parts that have more to do with meditation. But here, activity is the focus, not meditation. It is mindfulness in daily life – mindfulness in the activities we do. It is worthwhile to take some time with this and really begin to appreciate how this practice can be done in our lives.

There is a mutual relationship between how we develop our attention in meditation and how we develop it in

daily life. They support each other. They certainly support each other in that both are places where awareness gets stronger and then expands our capacity to be present.

It is also important because the two areas highlight different aspects of life – different aspects of ourselves. It might be wonderful if all we ever did was go to a monastery and meditate, but that would be a very partial experience of who we are.

Not a few people have gone on retreat to meditate all day thinking: “Wow, this is great. I am so wonderful. I will never be challenged again because I am so balanced, clear, and peaceful.” Then within a day of leaving, they are angry, upset, and yelling at other drivers. Or they find themselves completely consumed with desires. They have certainly learned to settle themselves on retreat. But they have not learned how to bring attention to what happens in daily life and how to be in daily life so that mindfulness carries the day, not their reactivity.

In meditation, we get to look at part of who we are. In daily life, we get to look at other parts of who we are. We can find a way to live wisely in both situations.

A great approach to mindfulness in daily life – in activity – is to do just one thing at a time. Whatever you are

doing, just do that. Part of the advantage of going on a retreat or living in a Buddhist monastery is that the ambience, atmosphere, and dedication – what is happening around you – is set up to support doing just one thing at a time, more so than daily life. When I was in the monastery, this was understood. If you are sweeping the monastery grounds, just sweep. If you are washing dishes, just do the dishes.

This idea is represented by a story in Japan when I was in the monastery. I went into the kitchen in the evening for a little snack. One of the monks was chopping vegetables for the next day's meal. I stood opposite the table where he was chopping and asked him a question. I have no memory of what I asked him.

What I do remember was that he put down his knife. He stood up straight, looked at me, and answered me in a very nice, matter-of-fact way. Then he picked up his knife and started chopping again. That is when I asked a second question. He put down the knife, stood up straight, faced me, and nicely answered the question.

Not really understanding what was going on, I asked him a third question. He put down his knife again, faced me, and said: "Gil-san, you know, I am here in the kitchen to chop the vegetables this evening. If you are going to talk to me, then I can't really do my work and focus on it." So then I bowed, apologized, and left.

He was doing just one thing at a time. When he was chopping, he was just chopping. When he was talking to me, he was just talking to me. He was dedicated to that. This was not really the time to have a conversation. It was reasonable that he wanted to dedicate himself to his work. It was the evening, and he probably wanted to get ready for bed.

That story represents the dedication to doing one thing at a time. Of course, it can be overdone. There are times, of course, when the one thing we do is several things. But then, just do that. I think I told a story yesterday about being a fast-order cook. I just did one thing – not one thing, but just one job. I was absorbed in just doing the job – surrendering to everything that was needed. I was tracking multiple things, but I was just cooking. So what one thing means varies from context to context. The principle is when you are doing something, just do that. Do not be involved with extraneous things.

This practice can enhance your experience with daily life. It begins to approach the wholeheartedness of monastic life. It is not monastic life, but you are getting some of the benefits because a big part of monastic life is the ability to do one thing at a time.

One way of developing this practice is to add in the idea of seeing one thing through to the end. An example might be you are walking in your house from the living room to the laundry room to move the laundry from the washer to the dryer. As you are walking, just do that. That is the task. Along the way, you may see something that needs cleaning or grabs your interest. You see that the mail has arrived, and you want to check it. But if you are doing one thing at a time and seeing it through to the end, just do what you set out to do – walk to the laundry room and move the laundry. It might be a little less efficient than doing something along the way, but in terms of cultivating mindfulness, it is more efficient to just do that.

If it is important to do something else along the way, then switch and do that, of course. But practice seeing one thing through to the end. Then when you are finished, you can look at the mail and do that one thing.

At first, it might seem a little artificial. But as you get into it, you will find that there is an enhancement of awareness – of presence. When we are fully present for something, it helps evoke the various capacities we have. Just being there can be very relaxing. It can free us from the preoccupations and the stresses of the day. A lot of our stress doesn't have much to do with what is happening in the moment. It has to do with our imagination or projection into the future. Our fantasies

or anxieties have more to do with our thought world than what is happening right here and now.

To see one thing through to the end and develop that capacity can be very freeing in terms of what builds up stress in our minds. And then, learn to enjoy doing that. We learn how to do just one activity, embodying that with awareness. It is not a duty. It is not mental, like, “Now I should just be here.” It is embodied – an all-body thing – just the body there for itself.

This practice, for me, also represents an experience I had in the Japanese monastery. Sometimes it was my job to bring the food from the kitchen to the dining room table, where we would eat. Sometimes I was given the rice to carry. I could carry the big pot of rice with one hand, so I would. To carry it with one hand seemed fine. I was doing the job. But whenever I did that, a monk would say, “Gil-san, when you carry the pot, carry it with both hands.” Just really be there.

In Zen, if you are drinking tea, you would not drink with just one hand. You would be there fully to drink the tea – just the tea. Seeing the tea, all of it, with both hands. There is something about using both hands that contributes to embodiment: “Let us be here for this – this one thing.”

It is the same with our posture. There is posture that is relaxed, but the posture is not participating in what we are doing. It is not just a matter of doing one thing with attention. How much of our whole being can we gently, lovingly bring along to do something so there begins to be a sense of being absorbed? The more of ourselves we bring to the activity, the more pleasurable it tends to become, and the more it enhances our capacity for presence.

Certainly, it is sometimes nice to relax at the end of the day. You sit in a nice easy chair and read or have tea. You are just reading, having tea, and drinking kind of mindlessly because you are doing that one relaxing thing. That is completely fine because you know, “This is what I am doing.”

It is qualitatively very different if you say, “Okay, now the one thing I am going to do is drink tea.” You sit up a little straighter, so your spine is involved. Then you pick up the cup with two hands. You really meet it. This is what you are going to do with two hands, with your whole body.

There are times when that begins awakening a very different kind of mindful presence – embodied awareness – than the idea that mindfulness is a mental activity of just knowing. Knowing I am lifting; knowing the cup. Knowing a feeling. That is part of what

mindfulness is, but it is partial awareness. We are using just one faculty. To bring our posture or body into what we are doing, feeling it and sensing it is how the sense of absorption or pleasure in the activity can grow.

In doing so, you find over time that you have more clarity, wisdom, understanding, and ability to tune into your environment and be in harmony with it or be wise with what you do. Doing and enjoying one thing at a time is not hedonistic. It sets up the conditions for wisdom, freedom, and clarity. So, do one activity at a time and then see it through to the end – within reason, of course.

We will continue with this topic of mindfulness of activities. We will see that some of the lessons we learn here are related to what we learn in meditation practice. We can learn to apply these lessons to meditation practice, and this supports our meditation.

So, thank you very much.