

Living in the Present

If you'd like to accomplish more with less stress, give your full attention to one thing at a time. It's the secret to success in any endeavor.

Sleepwalking is a fascinating phenomenon. I once read about a whole family afflicted with this problem. On one occasion everyone got out of bed, still sound asleep, to go to the kitchen for a midnight snack. In the morning no one could explain where the food in the refrigerator had gone.

In the eyes of the Compassionate Buddha, all of us are sleepwalkers. We go through the motions of living with little more awareness than someone who is dreaming. If we could watch our thoughts, we would find that instead of being here and now, our attention is constantly wandering everywhere and 'everywhen' else - to the past, to the future, to Never-Never Lands that reality has never visited.

Beneath the surface level of consciousness, perhaps 40 percent of our attention is imprisoned in the past - in vain regrets, futile lamentations, nostalgic memories. "If only I could become 25 again, with the glow of youth on my cheeks and the sparkle in my eyes, what would I not do?"

And another 40 percent is trapped in the future. "Just wait till I get my degree. After that let me become the president of the university. Then let me get the Nobel Prize, and then finally let me become the dictator of the whole world. Then I am going to be happy." It sounds ridiculous, but if we could listen in on our thoughts these are the kinds of things we would hear.

When most of our attention is trapped in the past and the future, the Buddha would say, we are bankrupt for the present. We are complete paupers here and now. That is why, when a little problem comes along, we sometimes feel as if we have been crushed by the Himalayas. The burden is not the problem; that is only an anthill. It is the bankruptcy of resources for the present that makes us feel unable to cope with the challenge.

All of us want to be completely alive, to live 100 percent in the present moment. What prevents us? More urgently, how can we bring such a state of mind about?

One clue is provided by a penetrating remark by the great American psychologist William James - a quotation which, incidentally, I found in a most unexpected place, an article in Vogue. This is a direct quotation: "The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. An education which should include this faculty would be the equation par excellence."

In that one sentence we have the secret of life: the key to genius, to success, to love, to happiness, to security, to fulfillment. We live where our attention is. If attention wanders all over the map, our lives cannot help being scattered, shallow, and confused. By contrast, complete concentration is the secret of genius in any field. Those who can put their attention on a task or goal and keep it there are bound to make their mark on life.

This is the central theme in all religions: training the mind to be like a lamp kept in a windless place, where the flame does not flicker at all.

That is why you will find training attention - "voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again" - at the center of every mystical tradition. The Buddha placed great emphasis on what he called "mindfulness" in other traditions, attention is considered the essence of true prayer. Even if you do nothing in prayer but bring your mind back whenever it wanders, Saint Francis de Sales says, your time is very well spent. In meditation, when we go slowly in the mind through the words of an inspirational passage like the Prayer of Saint Francis, bringing our attention back whenever it wanders away, we are engaged in precisely what William James called "education par excellence" - a faithful translation of the Sanskrit word brahmadeya, meditation.

One thing at a time

But meditation claims a small part of the day. Training the mind is very much like training a pup. If you try to teach a puppy to obey you for half an hour and then let it do whatever it likes the rest of the day, you will never have a well-behaved pet - and if you try to teach your mind this way, it will tear up your relationships, bully you into indulging it, and generally make a mess of your life.

Outside the time of meditation, then, what I recommend is simple but intriguingly difficult: do only one thing at a time and give it your full attention. This is the key to doing a good job of any kind, and the secret of learning to live completely in the present moment.

At first this advice will seem impractical, even nonsensical. But I assure you that it can be done - and that as your mind grows accustomed to giving your best attention to one thing at a time, you will find yourself actually accomplishing more without pressure, burnout, tension, or fatigue.

Attention, desire, and will

Training attention begins on the surface level of consciousness, the level of physical activity, the topmost level of the mind. But as we get deeper, we see that in training attention we are also training our desires and our will.

Even on the surface level we shall find we don't have much control because of compulsive distractions which are the order of the day. The essential problem in doing one thing at a time is that we don't really want to - or, more accurately, the mind doesn't want to. It is used to doing whatever it likes.

The wandering mind gets bored easily, so it likes to combine a task like brushing one's teeth with reading the Wall Street Journal or listening to a cassette on learning Italian. "Why waste time on your teeth?" the mind wants to know. "Why not do something interesting too?"

Actually, the Buddha would say, it is doing two things at once that truly wastes time. All we are doing is teaching the mind to do what it likes.

The problem with this is not found in moments of dental hygiene. It is discovered in times of crisis, when we can't stop thinking about something painful or oppressive no matter how much we desire to. Just when we most need some control over our attention, we are helpless. The answer is to train attention at every opportunity, even in little things, so the capacity is there when we need it.

Actually, the Buddha would say, there are no little things. Every moment is unique; every moment is precious. And life is a garland of such moments.

When we are completely awake in the present, every moment is fresh; nothing is ever stale.

Focusing on the task

There are, I agree, many times in the day when we are doing mechanical chores - washing dishes, for example - that simply do not require much attention. At such times I recommend repeating the mantra or Holy Name: Rama, Rama; The Jesus Prayer; Hail Mary; Barukh attah Adonai; Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-rahim; Om Mani padme hum - whichever you have chosen. Repetition of the mantra keeps your awareness in the present while your hands are engaged.

It is very important, however, to not do this when busy with a task that does require your attention, such as studying, operating tools, or driving. That is the time to put all your attention on the job.

Anything less not only divides attention by may well be courting an accident. Thousands of lives are lost on the road each year, and I notice that experts now connect many traffic accidents with doing something else while behind the wheel.

I am often asked if it isn't impossible to do only one thing at a time while driving. Don't such tasks require us to do several things at once, such as scanning the whole field of vision while accelerating, braking, or steering?

The answer is that driving with concentration is doing one thing at a time, as an expert racecar driver will tell you. The same holds true with many familiar activities, such as football or playing the piano. The body may be doing many things, but attention should be completely focused.

Past and future

One of the most precious benefits this skill brings is the capacity to live completely in the present, with all your inner resources at your beck and call.

When we dwell upon the past, what happens is that attention is bent away from the present, which is real, towards some memory, that is not real. And the will is not operative there, so we cannot bring attention back to the

present. If the will were operative, it could hold attention in the present so it would not stray into the past at all without our consent.

With this one apparently simple skill, the burden of the past is relieved completely. Past injuries are not real; their power comes from the attention we give them. Without attention, they have no more power than a ghost.

This is also the secret of forgiveness, not only of others but of ourselves. Only when we cease to feed a past wrong with our attention can we truly "forgive and forget."

In practice, this means that whenever you catch your attention wandering into the past - not only to painful memories, but any foray into the past - repeat the mantra and bring your attention back to what you are doing here and now. If the pull of the past is compulsive, combine the mantra with a fast walk and then throw yourself into vigorous, concentrated work, preferably for the benefit of others.

Similarly, fears, anxieties, and insecurities often refer to the future. What about our stocks and shares? What about our job? What about this? What about that? No one has ever benefited from worrying like this. The mind is being bent into the future - which, again, is an unreal world where the will cannot operate. If we can keep attention in the present, it will not stray into the future. Then we simply cannot be plagued by anxieties or uncertainties; they will get no attention at all. We will have the confidence to face whatever comes.

The fear of fear

In the depths of consciousness in everyone, even the bravest, lurk all kinds of nameless fears. The worst of these is what I call the fear of fear - not the fear of anything in particular, just the conditioning to be afraid. So long as we identify ourselves with the body, this primal fear will condition our response to life.

The natural way of dealing with fears is one by one. I am afraid of that lamp; all right, we can have the lamp removed. Then I become afraid of the switch, so we remove the switch. Now I am afraid of the wall. Remove the

wall and I become afraid of the room. Remove the room and I become afraid of the whole house. This is the primal response of fear.

The Buddha would ask, "Why deal with this fear and that fear? Why not deal with fear itself?" When attention rests in the present, the fear of fear begins to fade like the Cheshire Cat. Finally even its leer disappears.

When past and future have ceased to burden us, the mystics of all religions testify, we rest in the eternal Now. To live like this, with consciousness unified and all our vitality concentrated in the present moment, is to experience the infinite rapture of identification with the divine.