

Under the Bodhi Tree  
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Awakening Mind, Vol. 1, Issue 1

If you were at the end of your life, looking back – seeing yesterday, today and tomorrow – what would seem important? What would matter about the way you moved through these days?

For most of us, what matters is living and loving fully. The lens of mortality is a precious reminder. As Don Juan says, “When death makes even the slightest gesture, all our pettiness falls away.”

The purpose of spiritual practice is to remember. We all get lost in the dream: financial pressure; work deadlines; anxiety about performance; appearance; health; the well-being of our family. These lives are fast-paced and stress-filled. We have spots of feeling connected and relaxed while meditating: being with dear ones; while in nature or listening to music.

But there are huge swaths of time when we are totally on automatic pilot, in a mental reverie, squeezed and leaning into the future. We are on our way somewhere, and we have forgotten that this day, these moments and the beings we are with matter as much as anything in this world.

Our challenge is to live in this speedy world, in the midst of all our work and relational karma – *and remember*. It’s a lot more complicated than in the monastery or off in retreat. The tides of wants and fears that keep us on the merry-go-round are a force to be reckoned with.

Through his childhood, Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) lived in a dream of ignorance. He was unaware of the suffering of life. Once exposed, the young prince pursued spiritual awakening through all sorts of austere practices that left him weak and sick, and he was still wandering in a dream. Finally, after a night sitting beneath a Bodhi tree, he experienced freedom. What happened?

First of all, he stopped “doing.” This is the sacred pause. The Buddha discontinued all habitual activity and just sat down. Then, with a deep commitment to presence, he met arising experience – “the 10,000 joys and sorrows” – with compassionate awareness.

That’s it. He dropped everything and *paid attention*. Whole-hearted, mindful attention.

Spiritual life blossoms as we come to rest under the Bodhi tree. We are learning to pause each time we sit to meditate; listen to the rain; look into each other’s eyes; go into nature, or simply drop what we are “doing” and just be.

You might try it now – just stop reading and sit there, doing “no thing.”

Pausing can feel intolerable – the last thing we want to do. We are so busy trying to control experience, to figure out life or to avoid something, that when we stop, we are stuck with all the rawness of wanting and fearing.

It can also feel incomparably alive – real, intense and mysterious. In a true pause, we don't know what will happen!

There is training necessary to pause and honestly drop in. First, we have to remember. It helps to have scheduled pauses – sittings; meditation gatherings; mindful walks, yoga – where there is conscious intentionality around presence. We also need informal moments of stopping – before eating; after parking the car or hanging up the telephone, or in the middle of writing a letter.

The letting go of our doing momentum becomes natural and spontaneous, but not for a while. It takes commitment and practice.

After stopping our habitual mode, the training is around fullness of attention. This isn't about holding still physically. We spend plenty of time not moving our bodies yet speeding down some mental train track. Rather, it is a practice of embodied awareness: to be here, we must open out of thinking and awaken within our body.

Posing a simple question can deepen the quality of presence. “What's happening *now*? What's true? What is asking for attention or acceptance? What is driving or generating this current experience?”

The inquiry is not cognitive. Rather, these questions may be a means of inviting or including hidden and often vulnerable parts of our experience. In asking, we are really learning to look, and listen, and feel into our bodies, with interest and care.

If we start practicing the pause in the midst of strong, unpleasant emotions, mindfulness will expose a primal attitude of aversion – the feeling that “something is wrong.”

In these circumstances, our practice is to be as courageous and receptive as possible. The aspiration is to make room for *whatever* is here. It helps to soften in the body and gently say “Yes” to experience. “It's OK.” Or simply, “This, too.”

We all need some tender way of agreeing to experience if we are to genuinely pause and touch what is real. This willingness to be present, come what may, is beautifully expressed through the half-smile of the Buddha. The essence of the sacred pause is receiving life with a kind and open heart.

From the vantage point of the “end of our life,” what would matter was that today, *this* moment, was filled with wakefulness and care. We can pause and discover sacred presence right now. This is the adventure of living in a whole-hearted way.