Your True Responsibility

September, 2001

The very first time I went to stay with Chan Phuong, there was another young man who had just ordained. It was one of those ordinations that actually his fiancée had forced on him. She said, “If you don’t ordain for a couple of weeks, I don’t want to marry you.” So he ordained as a monk for a couple of weeks and actually discovered he liked it a lot more than he had anticipated. So when the day came for him to go back, he was beginning to feel doubts about whether he wanted to return to lay life. So that night, Chan Phuong gave a Dharma talk on how when you come into this world, you don’t come alone. You have your parents. You have other people who have nursed you through life, raised you up, and so you have responsibilities to them. So the next day, the young man went off and a few days later disrobed in Bangkok. About a week later, I was beginning to feel bad about being a monk. I was being selfish and just looking after myself. So that night he gave a Dharma talk on how when you come into this world, you come in alone. You’re responsible for your own birth. You’re responsible for your own actions. You’re going to be responsible for how you die. Of the two, I think the second teaching was the more true. When you come right down to it, there’s a part of you that’s totally alone as you come into the world, totally alone as you live here. Even when you’re with other people, there’s a part of your own internal dialogue that’s just you, between you and yourself. That’s what you’ve got to be responsible for. It would be nice if we could provide for each other’s happiness. We can a little bit, but for the really deep down parts, that’s something that we each have to be responsible for ourselves. If you constantly worry about this person, that person, no matter how close you are to them, there’s going to be a part of you that gets neglected, the part that you really are responsible for. This is a lot of what the Buddhist teachings are about, that you’ve got to take responsibility for yourself. Because who’s making the decisions? You can’t say, “Well, someone else made that decision for me,” or “This person made that decision for me.” Because there’s got to be a part of you that decides to go along with them, for whatever reason. So you have to look at those reasons. It’s not saying that what other people say is bad. Buddha never said that. But he says you’ve got to take what other people say and look at what your mind says, and then examine both very carefully to see which is more appropriate, which really does correspond to the way things are, the way things should be, the most skillful way of reacting to a particular set of circumstances. If you don’t develop your own powers of mindfulness and alertness, your judgment is going to be clouded. So this is your first responsibility right here. Fortunately, we have the example of the Buddha to show us how it’s done. When we talk about taking refuge, it’s not that the Buddha is going to come down and do things for us, but he’s given us an example of how people make their own decisions. How they do it wisely, how they do it skillfully. When you think about the story of his life, it’s amazing. He did one of the things that society really comes down hardest on. He left his wife right after she’d given birth to a child. I can’t think of any society anywhere in the world that condones that. Yet this is what he felt he had to do at that point. And it turned out, ultimately, that his decision was right. He was able to come back, and then he had something to offer to his wife and to his child. Nirvana, arahantship. And it’s the poem they attribute to his wife. She said, “All the suffering was worth it,” because he showed her the way that she could be responsible for herself and settle all the issues inside herself. The same goes for Rahula. He was able to settle all his issues, too. That’s the highest gift you can give to other people. And you can’t give it to them unless you’ve been able to settle your issues first. So this is where your first responsibility lies. Straighten out the affairs in your own mind, and then you’re in a position to be an example to others, to actually explain things to others. In a way that they can benefit from. So when you’re meditating, this is precisely what you’re doing. You’re taking on responsibility for your own mind. It’s not that we’re sitting here and waiting for somebody else to come in and inspire us, or for some light to come floating in that will suddenly clear things up for us. We have to do the work. This is what the whole teaching on skillfulness is about. If there’s any one teaching that’s most central to what the Buddha had to teach, it’s this issue of skillfulness. How do you develop a skill? And all of his teachings revolve around that. The Four Noble Truths deal with issues of, okay, there’s suffering and there’s lack of suffering. Which are the causes? Which are the effects? What do you do to bring about, to an end, the suffering? In other words, how do you arrange the issues in your mind skillfully so that they no longer lead to suffering? Even his teaching on causality, when you compare it to modern theories about learning, it tells precisely why it is that people are able to learn. There are feedback loops you can learn from. You’ve got this quality of attention in your mind which focuses on this, focuses on that, asks questions, frames issues so that you can work on them. So it’s not just sort of a rote feedback like in a thermostat, but there’s this element of attention. There’s intention in there as well, all of which explains why we’re able to learn. It’s because we’re able to learn that the teaching is there, that the teaching is useful for us. The Buddha teaches us how to frame our own questions. And as we get more and more skillful about it, we begin to get a better and better sense of which questions in life are worth focusing on and which ones are best left aside, which ones are really important, which ones are only secondary. So when you’re meditating, part of the issue is learning how to ask the proper questions. Why can’t I see things clearly in my own mind? Why is everything a mess? Because it’s not quiet enough. What do you do to make it more quiet? So you work on that question. Then it begins to settle down, settle down. What can you do when it attains a state of stillness? What have you done to get here? What do you do to keep here? And as you get more and more stable in that particular level of stillness, is there still some level of suffering or stress in here? When the mind is really still, it’s hard to talk about suffering, but there is stress. Where is it? What goes along with it? So it’s a teaching on how to frame questions, because it’s only when you frame the questions that you learn. It’s only when you look at your own mistakes, honestly and truly. That’s why the Buddha’s first requisite for someone who is going to study with him is, “Give me someone who is honest and no deceiver.” In other words, someone who will recognize his or her own mistakes and be willing to learn from them, be able to ask, “Okay, what went wrong here?” You start from the outside and you take that question deeper and deeper and deeper into the mind. And you begin to realize how many of the features of the mind’s landscape are not a given, but they’re actually a result of choices you’ve made. And you begin to get a sense of which choices were skillful and which ones are not. And this inner landscape here becomes a lot more malleable than you thought it could be. And sometimes, when you ask the right questions, everything gets turned around for the better. So we’re working on these two qualities, intention and attention. The intention right now is to be mindful, get the mind to settle down. Attention is watching, “Okay, is it really working or not? If it’s not, what can you do to make it work better?” So you learn how to get these two qualities of the mind closer and closer together, clearer and clearer, as the mind grows more still. So you can start making the right choices. As your level of skill gets so great, then finally you can go beyond even that. Things begin to really open up in the mind. Then you see that what the Buddha taught is really there. There really is a Daedalus. And when you get there, you realize, “Okay, it was through your own actions that got you there.” But at that point, even the sense of you doesn’t even exist in that particular state. But it doesn’t matter, because it is the ultimate in happiness, the ultimate in well-being. But you know what led to it. And that’s what can be taught to other people. You do this, you do that. This is what worked. And when you’re talking that way, then you’re talking with confidence. It’s not just something you read in a book, not some theory you’ve got. But it’s something that actually worked inside you. Once you’ve found it worked inside you, then you have something really to offer other people that’s really special. And it’s not just the kind of companionship that’s desperately trying to make up for that big lonely hole inside that each of us tends to carry around. You’ve been able to work through that lonely hole in your life. You have something to offer yourself, so it’s not lonely anymore. And then you have something to share to other people that’s really outside of the ordinary. So this is what it’s meant by taking responsibility for yourself, that gnawing sense inside that something’s wrong, something’s lacking. When you look into it, you see exactly where it is. And when it comes down to it, there’s a huge lack of attention, lack of awareness of what’s going on inside, kind of a bewilderment. The Buddha said that’s how we approach suffering. There’s one, there’s a sense of bewilderment. How does this happen? And two, then there’s a search for somebody else to help show you the way out. And most of us put those two qualities together in very unskillful ways. But when you learn how to put them together in a skillful way, the bewilderment turns into articulate questions. The search for someone outside is someone who can act as an example for what I can do. We’ve got the Buddha, you’ve got the Sangha, the noble Sangha. So once you take those two qualities of bewilderment and search and start learning how to use them skillfully, you get to the point where you really have ended the problem of suffering in the mind, in all of its manifestations. Then from that point on, you can do your best to help other people start turning their bewilderment and their search in skillful directions. But the help is really helpful only when you’ve taken care of your issues first, because those are the issues you’ve been carrying around for you don’t know how long. Those are the issues that each of us carries around. We’ve been carrying around for a long time. And the Buddha’s point of view are aeons and aeons. And this is the only way to work through them, so that the burden in the mind finally gets lifted. And that’s when you’ve taken care of what really is your responsibility. From that point on, everything else is a gift.

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