Bearing Responsibility Lightly

February, 2003

As we grow into the world, as we grow up and become more responsible for ourselves, we also start taking on responsibilities for others. Simply looking after our own bodies, making sure we have enough to eat, a place to sleep, that in and of itself is a big responsibility right there. And then there are other jobs that come in on top of that. And the work of the world knows no end. So we can’t wait until we have no more responsibilities before we make space for the mind, before we make time for the mind. Because the world isn’t going to open up and give us time. And if you wait until there are no more responsibilities, you’re usually on the verge of death, extremely ill, extremely old. And by that time, it’s too late. So we have to work now. Learn how to make space for the mind, even in the midst of our responsibilities. Even though there’s unfinished business out in the world, things that have to be done, we have to learn how to make space for the mind in the midst of all that. Otherwise, the responsibilities pile on, pile on. And we find we can never make time. We never have the space. And our minds go without the nourishment, go without the rest that they need. In order to keep functioning, in order to be able to bear responsibilities but not be weighed down by them. That’s the important skill in learning how to live in the world. You live with these things, you take on responsibilities, you have tasks in the course of the day, but you don’t let yourself be weighed down by them. This isn’t a necessary skill. So what it means is, even though there are lots of things we could be thinking about right now, we learn how to say, “No, not right now. This is not the time.” And we have to be firm with that decision. We can’t let these thoughts come sneaking in the back door. So as you sit here and meditate, remember, this is time for the mind to gain strength, time for the mind to gain nourishment, time for the mind to be sheltered. So you have to create that shelter for the mind, first by reflecting on how important it is to look after the mind. Because after all, who is it that’s bearing these responsibilities? Who is it that has to make the decisions for the work of the day? Well, it’s the mind. And if the mind is in poor shape, the decisions get sloppy, they’re not thought through, and that creates more problems down the line. So simply for the sake of bearing our responsibilities well, the mind needs a time to rest. And if there are important issues that need to be thought through, that means there’s even more need for the mind to rest first. So it has the strength, it has the clarity, it needs, in order to see what the problem is and see what the solution is. Oftentimes, when there’s a problem, we just keep butting our heads against the problem without realizing it. You can solve the problem only when you find the cause. Take care of the cause and the problem goes away. And that requires that the mind be clear, that it can see things clearly, pay attention, be observant, in order to develop those qualities it needs to rest with the breath. Rest with the word bhutto, whatever your meditation object is. So bring the mind to the breath, but keep it sheltered, because a lot of other thoughts are going to come pouring in. And you have to learn how to say, “No, not right now. We’ll deal with that later. Right now, what I need is time to rest.” It’s like sharpening your knives. Food doesn’t get cooked while you sharpen your knives. But once the knives are sharp, then it’s a lot easier to do the cooking. So you wait until the knives are sharp, and then you cook with them. So we’re sharpening the knives of the mind. It’s discernment. It’s the ability to see things clearly. Those are its knives. Now we’re giving the mind rest, staying here with the breath. It doesn’t have to move around a lot of different places. It doesn’t have to figure out a lot of different things. Just this one thing. When the breath comes into the body, what exactly is happening? What sensations are there? The more you can focus on the direct sensation of the breathing, the more you can focus on the sensation of the breathing, the easier it is to keep distracting thoughts away. Because you find that breathing, when you pay careful attention to it, can be a very pleasant sensation. It can feel good to breathe in. Wherever the body feels like it could use some breathing energy, just breathe in right there. And then look for the next breath. Where would you like to breathe now? And then the next. Pay attention to these tools you have—the mind, the body, the breath. Take good care of them. That’s what you’re doing as you meditate. You’re taking good care of them. You’re strengthening the mind. And when the breath flows smoothly through the body, you’re strengthening the body as well. So that when the time comes that you do have to think, that you do have to carry responsibilities, you’re ready, you’re strong, you’re prepared. This is the basic trick, or the beginning skill, in learning how to carry responsibilities without being weighed down by them. That’s true. We’ve got responsibilities—keeping the place clean, keeping it kept up. We can’t run off and say, “Well, I’ve got more important things to do.” Because, after all, the things that have been given here have been given to the Sangha. We’re their custodians. They weren’t given to us. They were given to the Sangha. So as long as we’re here, we look after them so that when we’re no longer here, they and other people who come will have a good place to stay. It’ll be in good shape, it’ll be clean, well cared for. So even here in the monastery, we’ve got responsibilities. We learn how to bear them lightly. In other words, even while you’re working around the monastery, try to stay with the breath. Try to be mindful. Try to have that sense of a comfortable center inside, and that way the responsibilities are light. You can even take them as a test. It’s easy to get the mind to settle down when you’re sitting here very still with your eyes closed, or relatively easy. But then the next question is, can you maintain that same sense of center as you’re moving around, as you’re doing work? It’s a good test for your mindfulness, a good test for your concentration, and it strengthens the mindfulness and strengthens the concentration. These qualities have to be exercised in all different kinds of circumstances in order to be really mindful. Really strong, really reliable. If your mind can settle down and be still only when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, that’s a very small part of life that you have covered, a very small part of life that you have protected. Only the still moments. It’s good that you can have the still moments. It’s necessary for the health of the body. But you also have to be able to maintain this state of mind in all situations. So your concentration, your mindfulness, your discernment will be up for the really big issues as they come, as aging comes, as illness comes, as death comes. Those are a lot more demanding than the ordinary responsibilities of everyday life. So if you can’t handle ordinary responsibilities, how are you going to handle the bigger issues? You take advantage of the opportunities you have now for strength, strengthening your mindfulness, strengthening your concentration, strengthening your discernment. If you’re at the stage where you really can’t settle down unless you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, okay, sit here with your eyes closed and learn to be mindful, at least for certain periods of time. Create at least this much space in your life for the sake of the health of your mind, the health of your body. Once you get more adept at this, then you can start moving out, learning how to be responsible in outside areas and yet not be weighted down at all. The mind is still centered, the mind is still detached, still still inside. And as you can maintain this sense of center in the midst of your other work, then you find that when the time comes to sit down, it’s a lot easier to get the mind to gather together, breathe in and out once in a while. So the basic skill we’re learning here is that even though there are responsibilities pressing down on us, we don’t let them weigh us down. We don’t carry them around. There are plenty of burdens that we could shoulder in this world, but we learn that we don’t have to carry them around. We do the work we need to do, take care of the responsibilities that we have to face, but we develop the skill that these things don’t impinge on the mind. They don’t weigh the mind down. So it’s learning how to find space to practice in the midst of all these other responsibilities. That’s the skill that we really have to focus on. If you wait until the responsibilities are gone, as I said, you’re either too old or too sick or too close to death to be able to do anything. By that time, it’s too late. You need to work on these skills now, while you’re alive, while you’re healthy. So that’s why it’s important that you create this space, even if it’s only a temporary space. At least it gives you a periodic rest, periodic nourishment, so you can live in the world without being flattened by the world. Because you learn how to mentally step out of the way when the world gets really heavy.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2024/0302n2b1%20Bearing%20Responsibility%20Lightly.mp3>