Responsible for Yourself

August 14, 2004

Chandrasvati once said that each of us has only one person in the world, the one person we’re responsible for, and that’s ourselves. He wasn’t saying that to make us selfish, but he was saying it to make us realize where our true responsibilities are and how each of us is responsible for our own actions. Each of us is responsible for looking after ourselves. All too often we abandon that responsibility to go looking after other people or straightening out other people or trying to straighten out the world, which is one of the reasons why the world is such a mess. We abandon the one area where we truly can be responsible, where we really are calling the shots. We’re not sure how much our actions are affecting other people, if they’re affecting them the right way or the wrong way, when our help is healthy for them, when our concern is reasonable or not. These thoughts eat us up. They sap our strength so that we really can’t do the things that we are responsible for. This is where our responsibility has to start. We have to make sure that when we act, we are coming from a place of strength, a place of well-being, because the choices we make when we’re strung out, when we’re in a position where we’re fearful or weak or confused, are not going to be skillful choices. They won’t have a good effect for ourselves or for the people around us. So we owe it to ourselves and to the people around us to look after our minds, look after our inner strength. So that’s what we’re doing right here, looking after the strength of the mind, feeding it good things, feeding it healthy food, the food of the meditation. The Buddha talks about four kinds of food for living beings. Only one is physical food. The other three are mental—contact, consciousness, and mental intentions. In other words, the things you pay attention to and the mental fabrications that you create out of them. That’s how you feed the mind. If you feed the mind unhealthy food in these areas, it’s going to get weak, diseased, greed, anger, and delusion. Lots of delusion will come up, which is why we have to be very careful about what we’re feeding the mind. Right now, we’re feeding it with a breath. But the intention involved with the breath is not just to be with the breath. It’s also to train the mind. That’s what makes it a skillful intention. Simply watching your breath without any purpose is not necessarily skillful. But you’re doing it to train the mind, develop good qualities of mind, which is why this is good food for the mind, which is why it’s strengthening. So always be very clear about where your primary responsibility is. It’s to keep the mind well fed, to keep it strong, because everything comes out of here. Sometimes you hear it said that we’re all one and that we’re responsible for the actions of other people. But that denies them their independence, their powers of responsibility. The whole question of responsibility then gets blurred and very fuzzy. You have to be very clear that you’re responsible for your choices. Other people are responsible for their choices. And you want to make sure that your choices are coming out of the right place. So as you look after the Source, the choices are going to take care of themselves. That’s an important element in skillful intentions, that they’re not just good intentions. You can convince yourself that almost anything is a good intention. But as far as being skillful or not, that requires that you check things. Look at what you do. Look at the results. And to see the results clearly, the mind, again, has to be in the right place. Otherwise, its perception of the results is going to be skewed. You can’t really trust it. The only time you can really trust your mind is when it’s very still and very sensitive. So again, that’s what we’re doing as we work with the breath. Get the mind still. Get it to settle down. Then watch for a while to see what’s going to come up. This is probably one of the hardest parts of the meditation. Many people, when the mind begins to settle down just a little bit, they say, “Okay, what’s next? Where’s the next stage?” Well, the next stage is just staying right there. And we get impatient. So you watch the impatience. Watch the boredom. Watch whatever else comes up in the course of this that’s going to pull you away. The thought that says, “This is stupid. I’m not learning anything. This is not a very intelligent approach.” Just watch that voice, because that’s a disturbance, too. When you’re trying to get sensitive to the disturbances of the mind, they eat away at your mental strength. And you’re not going to see those by jumping from one mind state to another. You see them by sticking with one and seeing the issues that come up in the mind that doesn’t want to stay there. Sometimes you watch them. Sometimes you have to argue with them, especially when the mind comes on with a reasoned attack on why it’s stupid to stay and watch things for a while. I remember very vividly the time when I was on an alms round, staying with the breath, staying with the breath, staying with the breath, and doing it pretty well. And the mind came up, “This is stupid. How are you going to get any intelligence just staying right here?” And the response was, “Well, okay, be willing to be stupid. Be stupid. See what it’s like to be stupid. See what you learn from being stupid.” We’ve all had our whole lives of trying to learn what comes from being clever, trying to learn what comes from being stupid, but being very watchful about it. And what happens as a result is your powers of sensitivity get strengthened. The stability of the mind gets strengthened. You’re not blown around by every idea that comes through. And so this way, you learn. Some learning comes from asking questions. Other learning comes from being still. As we said last night, these are the two sides of the practice, the questions and the stillness. Learning when is the right time to ask the questions, when is the right time to be still, so that your questions get more precise and you notice things that you wouldn’t have noticed otherwise. Like just now, when we were chanting, you couldn’t hear the crickets. Now that we’re sitting here still, you can hear the crickets very clearly. There’s a lot of stuff going on in your mind that’s disguised by the obvious chatter, a lot of the intentions that are going on in the mind that we ordinarily wouldn’t notice. We think that these things are just happening automatically. But there are little moments in the mind when you actually go along with a particular choice, and then you get back to what seems to be the main topic of conversation. But there are those moments, and you won’t catch them until you let things calm down and you realize, yes, it was an intention, an intentional act, an intentional choice. And the mind has its politics, just like the world has its politics. We’ve seen so many cases where someone wants to distract people’s attention from a policy they have or a decision they’ve made by talking about something else. This is how the mind deals with itself. We’re not going to see these things unless we let the obvious chatter die down and see what’s left. You’ll see other layers of chatter going on in the mind, other layers of activity. It’s like peeling an onion, one layer after another after another. And you can’t get to the inner layers until you’ve taken away the outer layer. The difference here being that sometimes you have to sit with one of the outer layers for quite a while to get to know it well before you can realize that it’s a layer and that you have to peel it away and that you can peel it away. In this way, though, you learn to be more and more responsible for those subtle and hidden decisions that you’ve made. The path of practice is a path of responsibility. It’s taking responsibility for your actions, taking responsibility for the fact that you have to know your actions, including the ones that you’ve been covering up from yourself. And this is best accomplished by allowing the mind to be nourished so it can get strong. Because sometimes the messages that are going to come through or the things you begin to see about yourself are not all that attractive. This is one of the reasons why people run away from meditation. They start seeing things about themselves they don’t like. So we have to work very hard on creating a good, solid state of well-being here. When some breath begins to get comfortable, let it spread throughout the body. Let it connect up with other comfortable sensations throughout the body. So you have this network of comfort that you can rely on and that you can get in touch with. As we’re saying today, different people will find different trigger spots in their body, the ones that tend to tense up first and then will create tension to spread through other parts. If you can keep those trigger spots, one, if you can identify them and keep them relaxed and know that that’s the first place to go when you find tension in the body, you can very quickly get back in touch with a sense of ease. And as you get more and more confident, more and more familiar with it, it’s like a net that goes through the body. Then you can think of everything else that happens inside you and outside you as going through the net and not touching the strings that form the net. That way, you can keep it wherever you go and stay in touch with it all the time. This network of relaxation, you have that as your basis, your foundation, so that when you’re making choices, you’re in touch with that sense of well-being. No matter what happens in life, it’s there. This is called learning how to take care of yourself, giving yourself a good foundation. So the choices you make do come from that foundation. And the choices that come from this kind of foundation are much more likely to be good for yourself, good for the people around you, because they come from clarity and well-being. They don’t feel so easily threatened by whatever comes through, either in terms of events outside or events in the mind. So regard this as your first responsibility, being responsible for this one person, then operating from this state of well-being. The decisions you make, as I said, are good not only for yourself but for the people around you. So having your priorities right like this is not a matter of being selfish or being uncaring. It’s a matter of wisdom, a wise strategy, a strategy that works for your well-being and the well-being of everyone around you.

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