Duties in the Present

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When we’re meditating, we’re taking our inner resources and trying to develop them for the sake of true happiness—a happiness that doesn’t take anything away from anyone else, doesn’t harm their happiness, and at the same time provides us with a happiness that’s really reliable, solid, stable, and sure. The more happiness we can find inside, the less we need to depend on things outside. And the less we depend on things outside, the less we’re going to be taking away anything from anyone else. That’s the way of the world outside. It’s one person gets something and the other person, somebody else, has to lose. But when we develop our inner resources, nobody loses. We benefit, and the people around us benefit as well. So what are these inner resources? You’ve got the body sitting here breathing. You’ve got the mind that’s thinking and aware. So to develop these resources, it’s like taking a seed and planting it in the ground. You bring your awareness into the body. That way, your awareness can grow. It’s not running around all the time, trying to create, jerry-build this little world, that little world, and finding that the world collapses, and running off and trying to find another one, create another one. It doesn’t waste its time doing those things. It settles into the body. It tries to be as fully aware of the present moment as possible, particularly be fully aware of the body, fully aware of the breath. Knowing when the breath is coming in, knowing when it’s going out. Noticing how comfortable it is, how right it is for the body right now. If you’re tired or sleepy, you may want to do some energetic breathing—deep, long in-breathing, short out-breathing—to help keep you awake, to build up your energy. If you’re feeling too tense, you may want to breathe in a way that’s more relaxing. Just check out the state of your body, the state of your mind right now, and experiment to see what kind of breath is good for them. You can focus your attention on any part of the body. It’s easy to see that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out, and the mind feels comfortable being centered there. So those are your resources. Try to keep everything together. Keep your thoughts with the breath. Keep thinking about the breath each time it comes in, each time it goes out. This ability to keep that thought in mind, that’s mindfulness. Sometimes we hear mindfulness described as present awareness. Actually, the word for present awareness is sampajjana. It’s alertness all around, knowing in the present moment. That’s sampajjana, sati, or mindfulness. It’s keeping something in mind. In this case, you’re keeping the breath in mind. As you keep the breath in mind, the Buddha gives further instructions as well. Once you’re clear about how the breath feels, he says, then be aware of the whole body breathing in, be aware of the whole body breathing out. What ways do you have of building up unnecessary tension around the breath coming in? Pulling it in here, or pushing it out there, or squeezing different sensations in the body in order to get the breath in, and allowing those unnecessary sensations to calm down so the breath can come in and out without putting any unnecessary or unpleasant pressure on any part of the body? More carefully, many times you’ll see that this happens. You squeeze certain sensations in certain parts of the body so that you feel this will pull the breath in, that will pull the breath in. But it’s really not necessary. The breath doesn’t need to squeeze anything at all. It’s the movement of energy. So anywhere where you find you’re squeezing the sensations of the body, back off. Leave those sensations. Let the sensations alone. Allow them just to be. The more consistently you can allow them to be, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, the more you find a sense of rapture developing, a sense of ease, fullness, refreshment. This is called developing your inner resources. For the sake of alertness, for the sake of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. That’s one of our duties in the present moment. Actually, there are four kinds of things you’re going to find in the present moment. The Buddha’s Four Noble Truths are right here. We tend to think of the teaching of the Four Noble Truths as something more abstract, but it’s actually a framework for learning. You’re looking at what you’ve got right here, right now. You’ve got four things. There’s going to be stress or suffering someplace in your awareness of the present. At the same time, there’s a mental activity that’s a cause of stress. Then there are mental activities that help put an end to stress. When they’re fully developed, you find that Fourth Noble Truth, which is the ending of stress, that comes about when you let go of the craving, when you feel dispassionate for it, when you abandon it. So there are four types of things to look for here in the present moment. Then there’s a task or a duty appropriate to each. You develop the path. That’s what we’re doing right now—developing mindfulness by staying focused on the breath. At the same time, when you get more and more clear about having a consistent and intention in the mind, this develops discernment. Discernment is probably the most important part of the present moment, which is the intention. That’s shaping how you experience things right now. When you’re meditating, you’re setting up a very clear intention in the mind. You’re going to stay with the breath. When you find that you can stay with the breath, then you move on to training yourself, as the Buddha says, to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in. Now to build up to that, you may want to go through the body section by section, or you can try the whole body all at once. If you have trouble staying with the whole body, move through the body section by section so you get to know it well. Start around the abdomen. Watch that for a while as you breathe in, breathe out. If you sense any tension or tightness there, allow it to relax. Then move up to the solar plexus. Follow the same three steps there. Then up to the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head. Then down the spine, out the legs, and starting again at the back of the neck, down the shoulders, and out the arms. So you get familiar with the whole body piece by piece. Then you can start piecing it together. So what you’re doing is very consciously setting up an intention and trying to maintain it. If there are any other intentions that may come in the way, just let them pass. If they knock you off the original intention, then as soon as you realize what’s happened, get back to the original intention. So at the moment, we’re developing mindfulness and concentration. That’s the path. Once it’s developed, then you can start looking more carefully into these intentions, because therein you’re going to find the cause of suffering, any craving that accompanies the intention, when you notice it. One of the best ways to notice it is to see if there’s any stress coming or going, because these things come and go together. So you try to comprehend the stress. Comprehend any kind of mental sense of burdensomeness that may come, say, around a pain in the body. That’s a good place to practice. When there’s a physical pain in some place, after the mind has developed a good, solid foundation with the breath, you can notice where there’s any stress, any pain in the body, and look at how the mind reacts to that. You’ll begin to see that there are a lot of unskillful thoughts surrounding the pain. So your duty there is to abandon them, because the mind usually doesn’t just look at pain. It has lots of intentions around the pain. Many of them are old habits we picked up way back when, before we could even speak. When we were little babies, we suffered from pain, and there was no one there to explain it to us. No matter how much our mother would try to comfort us, she couldn’t say, “Now focus on the pain and learn to understand the pain.” We couldn’t understand it. We were just face-to-face with it. We were trying to deal with it in whatever way we could think of. Many of our subconscious reactions to pain come from that period, which means we’re pretty ignorant. So now’s your chance to back up and unlearn some of those unskillful habits. So if you see any unskillful thoughts surrounding the pain that are contributing to making it more stressful in the mind, then let them go. That’s a duty with regard to the second Noble Truth. The same duty applies to thoughts that surround a sense of mental distress. You’re unhappy about something, and the mind can feed, feed, feed on that unhappiness. You have not only one Greek chorus, you have many Greek choruses in the mind that make it worse. And your duty with regard to them is to abandon them, let them go. Again, these are old habits we’ve picked up from way in the past, from times when we didn’t know any better. Now’s our chance to know better, to look at unskillful patterns of thinking when they come up in the mind and realize, “I don’t have to keep feeding these. I don’t have to believe these.” “I don’t have to encourage them.” Just let them go. If they arise again, you just let them go again. No matter how many times they arise, just let them go, let them go. Hold on to the breath. The more you can keep both hands on the breath, the harder it is to hold on to anything else. If you find a particular way of thinking is obsessive, then try to look and see what gratification or pleasure you get out of that kind of thinking. Why does the mind insist that it has to keep thinking in this way? It’ll have its reasons, but these reasons don’t stand up to the light of day when you really look at them carefully and give them a level gaze. You find it easier to abandon them. This is one of the things that the breath is good for. It helps make your gaze level so you don’t always sing along with unskillful ways of thinking. In this way, you have standards for what to do in the present moment. You get a very simplistic idea of what we have to do as we meditate. Just let go, let go, let go. You’ve got to hold on to some things. You’ve got to develop some things. Some things you neither hold on to nor develop. You try to comprehend them, i.e., if there’s stress or suffering anywhere in the mind, you try to comprehend it. As for skill and mental qualities, you don’t want to let go. You’ve got to hold on. You’re holding on to them as a path, as a tool, which is different from clinging to them. In clinging, you hold on to these things as ends in and of themselves. But here, you try to turn everything into tools. So you develop the path by sticking with the breath, developing good mental qualities around the breath. If you notice any stress or suffering, then you try to comprehend it and particularly look at the patterns of thinking that contribute to that stress and suffering. Those are the things you let go of. If you notice stress, you let go of the cause. As you let go of the cause, you get some hint of what that third noble truth may be like. Try to appreciate how much nicer it is in the mind, how more congenial it is in the mind, when you’re not holding on to unskillful thinking, when at least one part of the mind, the observer, can question that thinking. If you keep this up, ultimately you’ll be able to complete the duty with regard to that third noble truth, which is that you really realize that there is a cessation of suffering. There is an end to all the stress that you’ve been causing yourself. So when you come into the present moment, you realize that there are four things to look for, and that there are tasks that are appropriate to each. You don’t come into the present moment and just try to let everything go. You develop the path, as in that old simile of the raft. You let go of the raft when you reach the other side of the river, but while you’re on the river, you’ve got to hold on tight. Develop concentration. If you feel attached, it’s a healthy attachment, because it can help you let go of more unskillful attachments. When the mind is well-centered, then it’s in a position where it can really see where there’s stress, what element of craving in your present intentions creates that stress. So you can let go of the craving, let go of the craving, and finally get to the point where the mind doesn’t even need any more intention. That’s when real freedom opens up in the mind. But to get to that point, so you can realize that third noble truth, you work on the tasks appropriate to the other noble truths. This is a quality that’s called appropriate attention. You don’t just sit in the present moment or try to be immersed in the present moment. You’ve got duties in the present moment, and this is why the Buddha divides things up in these four noble truths, so you can know which duty is appropriate to which reality you’re facing right now. So keep this pattern in mind. One, it’ll help you get into the present moment properly and two, it’ll help you once you’re there, it’ll show you what you really need to do to get the best results out of this meditation we’re doing right now.

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