One Responsibility

October 3, 2012

Tell everyone in your mind that you’re going to stay right here for the rest of the hour, right here with the breath coming in and going out. Some of the people in the mind will agree, and other people will wait for a while, wait for their chance. So what you’ve got to do is be vigilant—one eye on the breath, the other eye on anything that might sneak up and pull you away from the breath. This is why the Buddha said when you start out getting the mind to settle down, you have to keep directing your thoughts to the breath and evaluate things. That means both evaluating the mind and evaluating the breath and evaluating anything else that’s going to come up that would take you away from the breath. Some of those things are random, others are more related to issues in the day, plans for tomorrow. You have to be firm in your intention that you’re going to stay right here, no matter how valuable or important or responsible those other thoughts may be. You don’t need to get engaged with them right now. You’re going to be responsible just for your mind right here. Because of the various things that pull you away from the breath, your sense of responsibility is one of the most difficult to deal with. You suddenly remember there’s something you’ve got to plan, something you’ve got to think about. And you can give yourself all kinds of reasons for why it would be good to think about that. Here you’ve got a whole hour. Nothing else is impinging on you. You can think about that. There’s a great passage in Thomas Mann’s book, Joseph and His Brothers, where Potiphar’s wife has been after Joseph for a good part of the book. Joseph has been resisting her advances. And then finally one day comes when there’s a festival. Everybody has to go to the pyramids on the other side of the river. They’re going to come back and have a big dinner. Joseph, being the chief slave, gets everything in order and then goes over to the other side of the river. And all of a sudden he remembers some things he’s got to deal with back home. It turns out Potiphar’s wife is back home as well. All alone in the house. And so he gives himself all kinds of good reasons why a good servant would go back to the house right now. He even has little poems to cement his sense of duty. And so he finally goes back to the house. Potiphar’s wife knows that he’s there, and she calls out, “Joseph, are you here, with me alone in the house? All alone in the house?” And she almost gets him. In fact, it’s because he went back that he then gets sent off to prison. There you are in the mind’s sense of its responsibility. You can tell yourself you’re responsible for all kinds of things and just get yourself into more trouble. So that voice that says, “I’ve got to be responsible for the family, be responsible for this,” just put that aside for the time being. You’ve got to look after your mind. Because there are certain things in your mind that nobody else can be responsible for, that you’ve got to take care of. How you deal with the pains in the body, how you deal with pains in the mind. Nobody else can take care of this for you. You see this especially clearly in little children. Sometimes you’ve got a baby that cries and cries and cries. You have no idea what’s wrong. No matter what you do, you can’t seem to get through to the kid. The same happens with people on the other extreme, people who are dying. There comes a point where you can’t reach them. And you realize they’re in a space that’s totally their own space. Well, each of us has that space. And that’s something we have to be responsible for. How to gain some control over your thoughts so that they don’t add to the suffering. When there’s enough suffering, there’s enough pain in just having a body. You don’t want to add any more pain on top of it. The Buddha makes the distinction between two kinds of pain. The pain simply of the fact that the body is going to have pains here and there. It’s like being shot with one arrow. But then he says you start thinking about it in ways that just shoot more arrows into you. The first arrow is just part of the body. That’s the way things are. All those other extra arrows are totally unnecessary. So that’s what we’re looking for is the unnecessary stress, the unnecessary pain we cause ourselves. And that’s our main responsibility. It may seem narrow-minded or selfish that you’re looking after yourself in this way, but if you can take care of this responsibility, you’re a lot less of a burden on other people. This passage is what they talk about in John’s passing away. And in every case, it’s a very inspiring event because they’re not suffering, and nobody around them is worried about them, because they’ve learned how to take care of themselves. It takes a huge burden off the minds and hearts of the people around them. So looking after your mind in this way is not a selfish thing. You’re taking care of your responsibility. So gain some practice in keeping your mind with the breath. If it wanders off, just gently but firmly bring it back. And each time you come back, reward it with a nice, comfortable breath. Deep down inside you, wherever it feels good. So you develop positive associations with coming back. It’s easier to come back. The other principle to remember is that no matter how important the thought that pulled you away, just drop it in mid-sentence. You don’t have to tie up the loose ends before you let it go. Just leave it with all its frayed ends and unfinished ideas. If it’s really important, it’ll be there when you come out of the meditation. If it’s something you have to think about, tell yourself, “Okay, at the end of the meditation I’ll give myself five minutes to sit here. Everybody else can go away, but I’m going to sit right here and think about whatever it is I’ve got to think about.” But right now is not the time to think about those things. Right now is the time to stay with the breath and keep watch over your mind as you stay with the breath. This is your one responsibility. At first it may seem onerous because it’s not something you’re used to, but as you get more and more used to it, you realize this is a good place to be. You can make a home here. We’ve all had experience of moving into a strange place and after a while finding that it really does feel like home as you get more and more familiar with it, more and more familiar with the customs, more and more familiar with the people around you. And it’s the same with meditation. Meditation becomes more and more of a home the more you do it. So the fact that this is your responsibility becomes less and less a burden on the mind, and more and more a lifting of burdens, because you realize at the moment you have no other responsibilities. This is it. And working with the breath, making it more comfortable, speeds up the process of making this feel like home. It also helps deal with some of the obstreperous members of your inner committee, the ones who want a little bit of pleasure right now. Being engaged with the breath, exploring how the breathing sensations feel in the body, that also can be pleasurable as you enjoy the process of exploration. When you breathe in, where do you feel it? Do you feel the breath in any unexpected places? Notice that. There’s a lot to understand here. There’s a lot to explore. So give yourself the time and the place. Give yourself the space. To take this on is your only responsibility. And you find that when you’ve got this responsibility taken care of, your other responsibilities in the world don’t weigh nearly as much on the mind as they would otherwise. The reason they weigh on the mind so much is because we do have this habit of adding unnecessary stress, unnecessary suffering. And so when you learn how not to add that unnecessary part, the other things don’t weigh on the mind at all. It’s like Ajaan Sawat’s image. The question he asked one time, “That mountain over there on the eastern horizon, is it heavy?” Of course, you know, when Ajaan asks a question like that, there’s probably a trick answer. And there was. He said it’s heavy for us only if we try to lift it up. It may be heavy in and of itself, but if we don’t try to lift it up, it’s not heavy on us. So there may be issues in the world, but as long as you’re not carrying them around, they don’t need to weigh on you. And that lifts a lot of mountains off the heart right there.

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