The Work of the World Is Never Done

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Sometimes when you tell the mind to stay with the breath, it’s not willing to stay. It’s got other things to think about. This is why the Inchons often say that when you sit down to meditate, take stock of your mind. Is it leaning forward or leaning back, to the left or to the right? In other words, is it thinking about things in the future, things in the past, things you like, things you don’t like? If it is, you have to talk to it. Point out the reasons why leaning into the future is nothing you want to do right now, or leaning into the past, leaning into things you’re greedy about, leaning into things you’re angry about. These are not really where you want to be. And see if you can think in a way that brings the mind to a position where it’s not leaning at all. It’s ready to be here in the present moment. Because there’s a part of the mind that says, “I can’t settle down until this issue is resolved.” But the world is always going to have unresolved issues. The work of the world is never done. And if you wait for everything to be straightened out outside, you’re going to die first. And they still won’t be straightened out. We have to meditate in the midst of an imperfect world, in the midst of a world that makes a lot of demands on us and requires a lot of attention. We have to learn how to say “no,” at least for the time being. Of course, it’s not just the world making demands. It’s that part of the mind that goes running out to the world. You have to learn how to cut that back. Because the world here means not only things outside, but it also means things in your body. There are going to be a lot of unresolved issues in the body. You’re going to want to wait until everything is healthy inside. Again, there’s always going to be pain in the mind. You’re going to hear something malfunctioning there. We have to learn how to meditate, get the mind still, and get it to settle down even when the body is not settled, even when the world is not settled. So learn how to talk to that part of the mind that keeps telling you, “I’ve got to take care of this, I’ve got to take care of that, I have to be responsible for this, responsible for that.” If you’re really going to be responsible, you have to think about the principle of karma. The reason there are messes in your life is because of messy karma that you’ve done in the past. And if you don’t train your mind, you can continue to make messy karma into the future. This is one of the reasons why, when we think about equanimity, it’s not the case that we don’t care. It’s just that we have to realize there are things that have been shaped by our past actions that we can’t change. But if we want to make sure that we don’t have to experience those kinds of things in the future, we have to be very careful about what we do. The mind is going to have to be trained so that we can be careful. So what you’ve got to do is learn how to think, to talk yourself into seeing that meditation is the solution to whatever the problem is, so the mind will be willing to settle down. If you have a problem that you have trouble thinking through, think of the image of the knife. You keep using the knife to cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, and you never sharpen the knife. It’s going to get to the point where the knife can’t cut anything anymore. So you’ve got to stop cutting for a while and sharpen the knife. The mind gets sharpened in meditation. You can see problems more clearly, see the solutions more clearly. It’s not the case that the more you think about a problem, the closer you get to the solution. Sometimes you have to stop thinking about it. You probably had that experience working with math problems. The more you think about the problem, the less you can see your way out. You drop it for a bit and come back to it, and you have a totally new perspective. Well, the meditation gives you that. Another image that the Ajahns like to use is the fact that you have to eat if you’re going to work. You say, “Well, the time spent eating, I can’t get the work done.” This is going to run out of energy. You have to stop working every now and then and eat. If you’re going on a trip and you’re hurrying to get to your destination, but you’re doing it to take time out to stop and fill up the car with gas, you’re not going to get there. So meditation is food for the mind, fuel for the mind. It’s a place where the mind can step out of the world for a while. They call it viharadhamma, a home for the mind. And one of the aspects of home is that you know how to shut the doors, shut the windows, so you can get some peace inside. Otherwise, our minds are like bus stations, open 24 hours a day. Anybody can come in, anybody can go out. And who knows what they’re doing in the bathrooms, and who knows what they’re doing in the different dark corners of the bus station. If you try to lie down and find any peace there, you’ll probably get robbed. If you leave your mind open to all the influences of the world, you’re going to get robbed of your goodness. So you have to learn how to shut things out for a while. People will say you’re pulling out from the world, you’re being irresponsible, but they don’t know what you’re doing. You’re actually being more responsible as you pull the mind out of the world. Take it inside. Get in touch with your body right now. Do it the best you can with the breath energy. Find some place in the body where you can find some rest, some ease. And hang out there. Because in hanging out, you’re not just sleeping inside. There’s work. Even concentration has to be maintained. It requires that you develop your mindfulness, you develop your alertness, you develop a quality called ardency. You’re learning how to make these things continuous. Usually they just come in bits and spurts. Like the phrases in music. The phrase lasts for a while, then it stops. Then another phrase comes, then it stops. But here you’re trying to make it continuous. So all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, then the next breath, then the next out-breath, and then the spaces between the breaths. You want to be right here all the time. Because it’s in those pauses, the interesting things happen. Usually when the mind pauses, when its mindfulness pauses for a bit or its alertness pauses for a bit, it’s not paying attention. You want to learn how to keep it continuous. And that’s what actually strengthens the mind. It sharpens your faculties. So when the time comes, when the time comes to leave meditation, the mind has been sharpened. It’s been fed, strengthened, in a position where it can be more skillful in its actions and see through problems, see through their solutions, and have a greater sense of confidence inside. Because now that its powers of observation are better, when new and unexpected things come up, you’ll be prepared for them. Or at least better prepared than you were before. So it’s not irresponsible to step out for a while. In fact, it’s actually necessary. But for any voice that comes in and says, “We’ve got to take care of this problem first, I won’t know any peace of mind until this is settled or that is settled,” you can’t identify with that voice. Because that’s the voice that will never let you settle down. You’ve got to counter it. You say, “I need to find peace when things outside are not peaceful. It’s when I need it the most.” This will require letting go, at least temporarily, of a lot of your concerns. If they’re really important duties that you have to do, you can pick them up when you leave the meditation. But for the time being, you have to say, “This is not my issue. My issue is just letting the mind settle down and get some rest.” And protecting the mind as it’s resting, so that you have your own space inside. A calm spot in the midst of a world that is not calm at all. Let me look at the Buddha. He said, “How happily we live. We have no animosity. In the midst of those who have animosity, without animosity we live.” And you can put almost any quality in there. How happily you live when you live peacefully in the midst of people who are not peaceful. Because it’s not the case that you’re going to be able to straighten out the whole world. You straighten out what you’re responsible for. You’re responsible for your mind. And you can’t let the issues of the world come in and obscure that. When you get your mind in good shape, then it can create a world around you that’s in a much better shape. But it has to start from within. So you can live peacefully in the midst of an unpeaceful world. There’ll be parts of you that will have to be affected by the world, but you won’t have something inside that’s not. We develop equanimity to protect this, but we also have to develop wisdom and discernment to reason with ourselves. Because there will be parts of the mind that are going out after the world. It’s the currents of the mind that flow outward, even though sensory impact comes in. The currents of the mind are going out to pick those things up and focus on the things that respond to its greed, aversion, and delusion. So it’s the currents within the mind that you really have to deal with, the ones that keep telling you, “You’ve got to go out, out, out.” And you have to learn how to say no. They’ll have their reasons. You have to have better reasons. This is why there are times when you have to use your discernment to develop your concentration, to cut off the concerns that will come and creep in and nibble away at your concentration. Keep them at bay so you have some space to do the work that really needs to be done. Because even though the world has work that’ll never be done, the work of the mind can reach a point where it is done. That’s another one of the messages that the Jhanas repeat over and over again. This is a place where the job can be done. And when this job is done, it gives much greater rewards than any other job there is. So try to keep that set of values in mind and use it whenever there’s a part of the mind that says, “You can’t meditate right now, you can’t let the mind be still right now, you’ve got to think about this, that, or the other thing.” You say, “No, I’ve got something more important that has to be done.” If you keep your priorities straight, it’s a lot easier to stay on the path of the mind. And to find that peace we need as we live in a very unpeaceful world.

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