Duties of the World, Duties of the Dhamma

June 7, 2018

Focus on your breath. Start with a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the process of breathing in the body. Let your attention settle there. Then ask yourself if the breath is comfortable. If long breathing feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t feel good, you can change the rhythm, the texture. In other words, you can try shorter breathing or in-long-out-short, in-short-out-long. Heavy, light, fast, slow, deep, shallow. Try to see what kind of breathing you’re doing. Something feels best for the body right now, and the needs of the body may change. But when you find something that feels good, try to keep with it until it doesn’t feel good anymore and change again. When the breath starts feeling comfortable, then try to spread your awareness to feel the whole body. Think of the breath energy throughout the whole body. As you breathe in, sometimes it flows down the back, sometimes it flows up. If it flows up too much, it’ll give you a headache. Think about going down, down the arms, down the legs. Try to maintain that sense of whole body awareness as much as you can. Otherwise, when the breath gets comfortable, you tend to focus on the comfort and leave the breath and zone out, which is not good. We’re trying to be alert and mindful. Mindful means keeping the breath in mind, not forgetting that this is where you want to be. Alert means watching what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. Then there’s a third quality, ardency, when you try to do this well. In other words, if the breath is not feeling good, what could you do to change? Could you change the point of your focus? Change the rhythm of the breathing? Try to find the breath that feels just right right now. If you find that the mind is wandering off, bring it right back. Try to stay right here with what they call the body in and of itself. In other words, we’re not looking at the body as it functions in the world outside. Whether it’s good-looking or not, whether it’s getting kind of old, whether it’s strong enough to do its work, just look at the sensation of having a body right here. You’re looking at the mind in and of itself as well. Keep the mind right here, not involved with anything else. It’s part of the formula that the Buddha describes, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. Any thoughts that have to do with the world outside, you want to put them aside for the time being. You’ve got to work on the body and the mind. Because these are the things you depend on. You have to take care of them. We function in the world because of the body and because of the mind. The world has meaning only because of body and mind. Make sure you get that sense of priority straight. Often we think the world is what gives us meaning. It’s the other way around. We’re the ones who give meaning to the world. So for the time being, just put it aside, all your other responsibilities, and learn how to take care of the body and the mind in and of themselves. This is called mental seclusion. We’ve come out here to the monastery, the end of the road, literally. What Ajahn Suwat used to like to call our quiet corner here, so we can get away from other people, other members of the family, people at work. So we’re going to have some time to look into ourselves. That’s called physical seclusion. But just because you have physical seclusion doesn’t mean you have mental seclusion. Mental seclusion is when you basically drop all your interest in the world outside and you’re right here. All too often we carry the world in with us. It’s part of our baggage. We sit here with our eyes closed, but the mind goes spinning after the world. We don’t get our full measure of seclusion, and the mind and the body don’t get cared for. It’s not irresponsible to be taking some time out like this. Because if the mind and the body break down, you can’t do anything on the world at all. So you’ve got to take care of them. And working with the breath like this is a very good way of healing both the body and the mind. Healing the body in the sense of getting the breath energy to flow well throughout the body. Healing for the mind in the sense that it gives the mind a good place to stay without a lot of worries and a lot of concerns. It’s looking after itself right here, right now. When you’ve got the body and the mind in their own terms like this, you realize that your duties are different from the duties of the world. The main duty out there in the world is to find food, to find friends, and then provide for them. To find family, provide for them. But the mind feeds on these things as well. But the Buddha boiled the issues of the world down to wealth, loss of wealth, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain. And for most of us living in the world, we find that our duties are to try to find as much wealth and status and praise and pleasure as we can. But when you put the issues of the world aside, the duties change. In that discourse that we chanted just now, that was the Buddha’s first discourse after he gained awakening, he talks about a different set of duties. First he talks about the Four Noble Truths. He said there is suffering, and the suffering is the clinging. That right there is radical. For most of us, suffering is something that comes from things outside. It’s just plain old pain in the body, pain in the mind. But he was saying that the real suffering is in the clinging. And the clinging comes from craving. Craving for sensuality, craving to take on a particular identity in the world, or to destroy an identity that you have. But suffering can be brought to an end. There’s a path of practice that attacks suffering at the cause, at the craving. And when you can develop dispassion for the craving, then you’re free. So you’ve got the Four Noble Truths. Each of them has a duty. These are different from the duties of the world. When there’s pain in the world, we think we’ve either got to run away from it or push it away. But the Buddha says that if you really want to get past pain and suffering, you’ve got to learn how to comprehend it. In other words, really understand what’s going on, where it’s coming from, why it’s happening. Because our biggest cause of bewilderment in the world is that we don’t understand pain. We go running around looking for someone else who might cure the pain for us. And the Buddha says, “Well, he can give advice, but he can’t cure it for us. We have to do the curing ourselves. But fortunately, it’s something we can do. We have that ability.” He talks about the path, which boils down to virtue, concentration, discernment. These are things that people can do, that human beings are capable of. Then you develop the path, and that’s the duty with regard to that Fourth Noble Truth. You develop it. You bring it into being. Then you can complete the other two duties, which are to abandon the cause of suffering and to realize the cessation. So you’ve got four duties. Comprehend suffering. Abandon its cause. Realize cessation by developing the path. This is a very different set of duties from the duties the world imposes on you. But you have to look at those duties that the world imposes on you. Do they care about you when they impose these duties on you? And is it for your long-term well-being? If you let your life be run by the world outside, they run you into the ground. And then when you get old and die, they just throw you away. The Buddha never throws you away. He says, “For your long-term well-being, welfare, and happiness in this life and in future lives, these are the duties you have to follow.” He’s not imposing them on you. But you have to ask yourself, “Do you want genuine happiness, genuine well-being, a well-being that is harmless?” In other words, a well-being that causes no harm to anybody at all. Not to you, not to anyone else. That happiness that’s solid, that doesn’t require that you feed on anyone anymore or lean on anyone anymore. So it’s not a selfish happiness. In fact, to gain it, you have to be generous, you have to be virtuous, develop all the good qualities that we associate with good people. But our sense of duties is different. We’re doing this so that we can comprehend suffering, abandon the cause, by developing the path. It’s when we take time to put the world aside for the time being, to focus on the body and the mind in and of themselves. These are the duties we have, and they are duties for our well-being. So right now we’re trying to develop mindfulness, alertness, awareness, and ardency to bring the mind into concentration. Because it’s in concentration that the mind gets a sense of well-being, a sense of nourishment. The mind can settle down. The breath feels good. The body feels good. You can think of the sense of ease spreading throughout the body together with the breath. And you find that the mind gains a lot of strength. When you can find a source of happiness inside, you’re not so dependent on getting other people’s approval, and you’re not their slaves anymore. Our fear that our source of happiness outside, in family and friends, will be taken away from us is what makes families and friends have power over us. They can order us around. The world at large is like that. They try to order you around. They’ve got their ideas of their duties. They want to impose on you. If we don’t have any independent source of well-being inside, then we’re afraid to lose whatever well-being they can give us. But here the Buddha is saying we can change the balance of power. It’s like having your own source of food inside. You don’t need to depend on other people to provide you with food. You’ve got this source of happiness and well-being. You don’t need to depend on other people’s praise for the status they give you. And you’re not afraid of their taking that status away, taking their love away, taking their respect away. You’ve got something more reliable inside. Now, this goes against the values of the world. But again, were you born to satisfy the demands of the world? As John Fung used to say, “Nobody hired us to be born. We wanted to be born.” As the Buddha pointed out, there’s nobody in charge of the world, nobody in charge of the universe. So there’s nobody that tells us we can’t look for true happiness, we can’t look for a harmless happiness. We have it within us to choose which kind of duties we want to fulfill and which ones we think will be most fulfilling for us. But to get that inner strength requires that you work at the path and you develop these qualities of ardency, alertness, and mindfulness that bring the mind to concentration, which create a sense of well-being, a sense of stability, a sense of strength inside. So when the time comes to go back and function in the world, you’re coming from a position of strength, you’re coming from a position of independence. And you find you don’t have to be led around by the nose the way you used to be. Most of us are like the water buffalos in Thailand. They put a ring in the water buffalo’s nose and then when they want the water buffalo to go left or right, they pull the ring. And of course it hurts, so the water buffalo has to go in the direction they want it. And for a lot of us, that’s how we live in the world. Other people put rings in our nose and then they pull them. When you learn to meditate, when you learn to develop the factors of the path, you learn how to cut those rings. Not that you’re going to be selfish, but simply that you’re going to learn how to be more independent in your search for well-being, so that ultimately you can provide for your own well-being and not have to be a burden on others. So when the time comes to leave the world, you’ve got something good to take with you. And you’ve left a lot of good things for the world. other people behind.

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