Responsibilities

June 15, 2021

When you come to a quiet, secluded place like this, and you have some physical seclusion, you sit down to meditate, and you find your mind dragging everything from back home in with you—all your responsibilities, all your concerns. And it’s very easy to think, “If only I had no responsibilities at all, if only I could cut them off, then I’d be happy, then I could meditate.” But that’s saying that you would have to have a perfect world in order to meditate, and we know the world is very imperfect. You have to develop some mental seclusion where you can cut yourself off from those things, even when you’re not in physical seclusion. In other words, you take your time out to meditate, and as you’re meditating, you have a different set of values from the ones by which you engage in your life normally. In other words, in normal life, a lot of your value as a person, or at least as you see it, is based on the fact that you’re meeting your responsibilities. But when you sit down to meditate, you have to realize that you have to be responsible for your mind. That means you have to put your other responsibilities off to the side, at least for the time being, and learn to regard those things that the mind feeds on, gains its sense of self-worth, as hindrances. It requires a shift of perspective. Here again, this is where it’s good to have a sense of the mind as a committee, and your meditator is someone different from the mother, the father, wife, husband, worker, boss. When you take the one seat as you sit down to meditate, you take off all your other hats. And if you’re wearing a hat, you’re wearing the meditator’s hat. Your prime responsibility is getting some control over your mind. And that requires gaining a sense of well-being as you breathe, so that the control is not harsh and doesn’t see things in black and white. In other words, you can have your responsibilities outside, but you can be away from them for the time being. Or as you’re going through the world, you can deal with your responsibilities, but you can carry at least some of the meditation in with you. So while you’re sitting right here, your main concern is cutting off your ideas of responsibility outside. Because if you really were to abandon your responsibilities, there’d be some scars. If you can’t learn how to put them down, temporarily at least, you’re going to carry them with you wherever you go. And the fact that you would abandon them outside would eat away at you inside. So the ideal solution is to take on this new identity as a meditator. Learn to look at your responsibilities. Be certain about how many you should carry around. Part of you is worried that you’re not fulfilling your responsibilities. Those are both hindrances. Restlessness and anxiety. Uncertainty. It makes it hard to commit. So think of that woman who came to see Ajahn Fuhring one time. She came to the monastery to meditate for two weeks. One day she came to see him to say goodbye. She said, “I’m going to go back home.” “Why?” he asked her. “I thought you were going to stay for two weeks.” She said, “Well, I’m thinking about my husband back home and my children. How are they going to fare without me?” So Ajahn Fuhring told her, “Tell yourself that you’ve died. They’re going to have to look after themselves one way or another.” And she was able to stay on for the two weeks. So as you meditate, you’ve died from your other responsibilities. You’ve crossed a boundary. And as long as you’re inside the meditator’s boundary, there’s no going across. Make that a law with yourself and then stick with it. Because, as Ajahn Fuhring would often comment, the hindrances of uncertainty and restlessness come from the fact that you’re not really doing the meditation. Part of you is doing it and part of you is pulling back. So you’ve got to cut off all the parts that would pull back, and the parts that are afraid of not doing it well. Because the only way you’re going to learn how to do it is to do it. Watch it for a while, and if it’s not going well, ask yourself, “What’s going wrong?” Then you’ve got something you can correct. You’ve made a stab. You’ve made an experiment. And if it doesn’t work, you can try to use your powers of observation and say, “Well, what could you do differently?” But if you don’t have anything to correct, in other words, you haven’t done it, then there’s no way that you can make progress. And simply sitting here, wishing that you had no responsibilities, that in itself is a hindrance. After all, think of the Buddha’s students. He had a number of laymen and laywomen who were non-returners. There was Nandamata, the woman who was a non-returner, who got up early in the morning to chant the fifth chapter of the Sutta Nibbata. One day a yaksha came by—this was in the pre-dawn hours—and told her, “Venerable Sariputta and Moggallana are coming with a group of monks to the village today, and no one knows that they’re coming. No one’s prepared any food for them. So I’m telling you so you can prepare some food and then dedicate the merit of the meal to me.” So she did. There’s the case of Citta, who actually taught monks. There are some question-and-answer sessions where he shows that he was, deservingly, the layperson that the Buddha had chosen of his laymen disciples. He was the foremost teacher of Dhamma. Now, the tradition tells us that they had responsibilities, which is why they didn’t ordain him. In Citta’s case, I think it was his mother. He had to look after her. And yet he was still able to get his mind under control, still able to find time to train his mind. Nandamata, as we learn, as the teacher of Dhamma, was not only able to converse with yakshas, but she’d master the jhanas, again, at home. And we know that she had at least one child. And when bad fortune befell the child, she was able not to suffer. And as she said, she loved the child. She loved the child very much. But she was able to step back from her love and see where its drawbacks were. That’s what you’ve got to do with your responsibilities. Realize that many times you cannot abandon them. And there’s that part of the mind that feels that only if you keep the responsibility in mind at all times can you fulfill it. You’ve got to question that. The more you carry these things around and the more you try to build your sense of self-worth around them in order to keep carrying them around, the more you create trouble. You have to learn how to pick up the responsibility, put it down, and not make your identity depend on it. You do it because it’s to be done, not as a choice. It’s not a chore. Don’t think of it as something you’re happy to do. After all, it is good to look after other people, to have some responsibilities. But you have to learn how to wear these responsibilities lightly. Watch out for that romantic picture of the monks and nuns out in the forest with no responsibilities at all. They didn’t go simply because they wanted to have a nice time in the woods. In each case, there was somebody they had to teach, someone for whom they were responsible, perhaps with some connection from a previous lifetime. You can read a John Lee autobiography and notice there was that one time when he decided it had nothing to do with the human race at all and ended up getting sick. So the message he realized was that he would have responsibilities, but he had to learn how to wear them properly. So learn how to wear your responsibilities lightly and know when to put them down, when to pick them up, and when to put them down again. And have clear lines around your mind as you meditate. Anything that has nothing to do with the breath right now is off-limits. The breath, the body, your awareness right here in the present moment. You have to be just that much and be strict with yourself and not wandering away. Or as the Jons would say, “Be true to your meditation.” And when you are, you find you can engage with it and benefit from it and do well, both when you’re in physical seclusion and when you’re not. So don’t make your outside responsibilities the measure of whether you’ll be able to meditate or not. Look at your attitude. Get that attitude in line with the Dhamma. And you’ll find that the meditation will go well. It may not go well quickly. It may take time. But at least you’re headed in the right direction.

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