What You’re Responsible For

December 14, 2021

Ajahn Suwa would often comment on how with all the people in the world, there’s really only one person, in other words, the person for whom we’re responsible. That’s us. As we go through life, we take on lots of other responsibilities, looking after our family, looking after our community. But there are certain responsibilities inside that only we can take care of. If we spend too much time worrying about outside responsibilities, the inside responsibilities get abandoned, get neglected. And then, when the time comes when we really need some inner strength, we find that it’s not there. So when we come to meditate, we’re focusing on the area where we’re our real responsibilities are—inside us, our responsibilities—the state of the mind, what the mind says to itself, how it creates suffering for itself, or how it can learn not to create suffering for itself. Which means, as you’re sitting here, there are certain things, even within you, that you’re not going to be responsible for right now. It’s a cold, wet night. But you’re not responsible for the cold. You’re not responsible for the wetness. So don’t focus there. Wrap yourself up warmly and then tell yourself, “That’s been taken care of.” For the rest of the hour, no comments on how cold it is, how wet it is outside. Just the issue of you and your breath, right here. The mind and the breath. Is the mind staying with the breath? If not, is the problem with the breath, or is it with the mind? First, focus on the mind. Get a sense of what kind of mind you’re bringing to the meditation. Think about the future. Think about the past. Put those thoughts aside. Too much energy, too little energy. Focus on the breath in a way that compensates. Breathe in a way that gives you more energy if you need it. If you have too much energy already, breathe in a calming way. Bring the breath in to bring the mind into balance. And then take an interest in the breath. The more interested you are in the breath, the more likely you are to stay right here, right now. If the breath is boring, you’re going to find someplace else to go, something else to think about. So ask questions about the breath. This is why the Buddha makes direct thought and evaluation an important part of getting the mind to settle down. The question is, how long are you breathing right now? Could it be longer? Would that be better? How about shorter? Deeper? More shallow? Heavier? Lighter? Experiment with different kinds of breathing to see what the body needs and how the breath can provide for those needs. And if nothing much seems to be happening, that’s perfectly fine. You’re here to watch. You’re like a spy observing a person who may be coming and going and doing very ordinary things most of the day, and then maybe once a day does something out of the ordinary. You have to be here all the time. Because things will show up. The mind does have its defilements. But for right now, your main concern is, if anything else comes in, learn how to brush it away. Breathe through it. Think of the breath as a broom sweeping all your other thoughts away. And keep reminding yourself that this is your responsibility. Stay right here, keeping your mind under control in the present moment, because this is a skill you’re really going to need when aging comes, when illness comes, especially when death comes. As the Buddha points out, the state of your mind at the moment of death can have a huge impact on where you’re going to go. So you don’t want it out of control. You want to be able to keep it focused all the way through the end and out the other side. So you talk to yourself, you encourage yourself in this direction. That kind of thinking is not a problem. That’s part of the meditation. Any thinking that keeps you focused, that’s a friend. Any thinking that would pull you away, that’s something you’ve got to let go. Although nothing much seems to be happening, the fact that you’re able to stick with this and to stay interested in what might potentially happen in the breath, you’re developing a skill. And as with any skill, there’s a lot of repetition, doing things again and again and again, so as to get them right, and to get them right consistently. You have a strong sense that this is a really light responsibility you have at the moment. If you lay claim to other things, it’s heavy. There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha is talking to the monks. They’re in Jetavana, and he says, “If someone were to come and take the sticks and the twigs and the leaves and the branches here in Jetavana and burn them up, would you complain that they’re burning you up? Well, no, because those things are not us.” The Buddha said in the same way, “Whatever is not yours, let go of it. That will be for your long-term welfare and happiness.” It’s an interesting passage. He’s not saying there’s no you there. After all, you’re doing this for your welfare and happiness, long-term. He’s simply pointing out that if you lay claim to things, that weighs you down. So whatever you don’t have to lay claim to right now, think of that as lightening the mind, lifting the mind, even though there are responsibilities out in the world that you will have to take up after the meditation is over. At the moment, you don’t need them at all. There’s no need for you to lay claim to them at all. That will be for your long-term welfare and happiness, because you’re being responsible for the area that you really do have to be responsible for, maintaining right view, right resolve, and all the other right factors in the path. They all come together. If you stop to make an analysis, yes, they’re all here. For the time being, there’s no need even to make that analysis. Just be confident that what you’re doing is on the path. Learning this skill of keeping the mind focused steadily as you go through the line of time, like a little bead going down a wire. It doesn’t skip off the wire, it doesn’t go back and forth. It just keeps following the wire down, down, down, down, down inside. In that way, you develop real singleness of mind, citta ekagatha, which is the quality of the mind that comes and gathers together in one place. Eka, one; aga, gathering place. And then the dha is what makes it a noun. One gathering placeness. Make this your sole responsibility right now. Everything else you can leave to the mind to take care of itself. The cold will take care of itself. The wetness outside will take care of itself. For the time being, your other responsibilities will take care of themselves. Make sure that you take care of this, because it doesn’t get taken care of itself unless you do it. This ability to keep the mind focused, to abandon any unskillful thoughts that come up, to encourage the skill ones, and to know when even the skillful ones can be put aside so you can just be right here, gather together right here. That’s the only thing you’re responsible for right now.

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