Your Work

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One of the first lessons I learned from Ajahn Phuong was having a good sense of what is your responsibility and what is other people’s responsibility. And how important it is to know the difference and to take care of what you’re responsible for. Don’t neglect that and mess around with other people’s responsibilities. Years later, I found a passage in the Canon that made the pretty much the same point. The wise person knows what duties fall to him or her and focuses on those duties. He also notices what duties fall to other people. Those are the duties you have to let go. And your prime responsibility is the state of your mind, because it’s from the state of your mind that you act. And the actions have repercussions both for you and for the people around you. And although we do get support from people outside, if we choose them well, there’s a lot in the world that does not support the well-being of the mind. There are people, situations, that can get you very discouraged. They can get you worked up about all kinds of things that ruin the state of your mind. When the state of your mind is ruined, you can’t just sit there and note that it’s ruined. You have to do something about it. There’s a tendency nowadays to say that mindfulness is aware of whatever arises in the mind and doesn’t pass any judgment. And then somehow we’re supposed to act mindfully, which means that we put more thought into what we do. We’re more careful. We’re more conscious of the consequences. Those two teachings don’t go together. The way you act is going to depend on the state of your mind. And so your influence in the world is going to depend on your looking after your own mind state. This is your work. Other people can give you advice, but you’ve got to do the work yourself. When you see that something unskillful has come up in the mind, you can’t just sit there and go along with it or just watch it. Sometimes if you’re not sure about what it is, you watch it for a while. But when it becomes obvious that it’s not skillful, you’ve got to do something. When the Buddha discusses what you do with your mind in the context of breath meditation, the very first step, of course, is to be aware of what state the mind is in. In the tetrads, this comes in the third tetrad, it’s not the case that you do the first tetrad first and then the second tetrad second and finally get around to the third. Because after all, when you’re sitting here focused on your breath, you’ve got everything in all three tetrads right here. You’ve got the breath, which is the body. You’ve got the feeling of ease or dis-ease. And then you’ve got the state of the mind, watching or not watching the breath, as the case may be. And when things are not going well, you have to figure out, okay, what’s the problem? Which of the tetrads do you have to focus on? Sometimes the problem is the way you breathe. So you experiment with the way you breathe. Sometimes the problem is the feelings. Can you breathe in a way, can you focus on the feelings in the body in a certain way? So at the very least, if there are pains in the body, they don’t overcome the mind. Because that ultimately has to be your goal in dealing with feelings of pain. Not so much that you want them to go away, but they don’t overcome the mind. So you look at the perceptions you have around the pain. Is the pain a solid block? Or is it moments of pain coming and going? And when they come, do they come at you or do they go away? It’s a better perception to have them going away, like sitting on a train with your back to the engine. As the train goes along, you look out the window and the countryside goes past. And as soon as anything comes into the range of your vision, it’s already going away from you. If you hold that perception in mind, you find that the pain is not coming at you. You’re not receiving the pain. It’s a lot easier to stay with it that way. Or you can try to pursue the sharpest point of the pain. Then you find that it moves. Sometimes you focus on a spot where it’s sharp and then it blurs out, disperses. Or it doesn’t disperse, it moves someplace else. So you keep chasing it, chasing it. And by changing your relationship to the pain, instead of being the recipient who’s the target of the pain, you become the pursuer. You find that the pain doesn’t hit you so hard. And the mind can be with the pain and not suffer from it. That’s one way of looking after the mind. Then the steps in the tetrad say that when you have dealt with the feelings, and there’s still some problem going on, you have to ask yourself, “What state of mind are you in?” And the three mind states that they seem to deal with are depressed, unconcentrated, and burdened down. So you have to learn how to think in ways that will counteract those tendencies. The first one is to gladden the mind. Sometimes the way you breathe can gladden the mind. Think of the body opening up and the breath ventilating every part of the body. Think of all the dusty corners, all the stuffy attics, all the moldy basements. Think of windows opening up and all of these things. Think of a good strong breeze coming through, cleaning things up. Or you can think of any of the contemplations or reflections that the Buddha gives you. You can reflect on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. The fact that we live in a world where someone has been awakened and has left the teaching behind on how to do it, that’s not always the case. We tend to take it for granted. But we shouldn’t. There can be long aeons when nobody is awakened and life is dark. We have a Buddha who left the teaching behind, and a sort of teacher who didn’t ask for anything in return. Just that you respect the Dhamma and try to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma and not try to reinvent it. Because it is a good Dhamma. It points you to where the real problems are and where the real solutions can be found. That’s what the Sangha thinks about the Buddha. The fact that there have been people over the centuries of all kinds—men, women, children, educated, uneducated, rich, poor—all kinds of people have been able to benefit from this Dhamma, passed it along, not only by memorizing it and repeating it, but more importantly, by practicing it, keeping the example alive. You can use these thoughts to gladden the mind. You can gladden the mind with thoughts of your own generosity, your own virtue. The times when you were generous and you didn’t have to be. The times when you could have gotten away with breaking a precept, but you decided you didn’t want to. Those thoughts are nourishing to the mind. The times when you acted in a noble way. Those thoughts can be uplifting. You can think about death. You may not think that death is a gladdening topic to think about, but you realize that you’re here working on the best way to prepare for it by developing the skills of concentration, the skills of mindfulness and discernment. These are the strengths you’ll need when death comes. You can take joy in the fact that you’re preparing yourself. It’s much better to die while you’re meditating than it is to be suddenly struck down when you’re in the midst of making jealous thoughts or angry thoughts or petulant thoughts. Thoughts about sex, thoughts about how we’d like to get along, thoughts about how we’d like to get back at somebody. You’re in the best place to be, whatever happens. So these thoughts can gladden the mind. Then, of course, the next step is to steady the mind, get it concentrated. Some people don’t like the word “concentration” because it sounds like you’re putting in too much effort. But you’ve got to put in the effort. After all, the concentration is focused on the establishing of mindfulness. And the establishing of mindfulness involves mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. And it’s the ardency that makes it right. Unskillful qualities come up, and you do your best to get rid of them. Skillful qualities are there, and you nurture them. That takes work. But it’s good work. If you’re working with the breath, getting it soothing, getting it nourishing, it’s work that’s sustaining. You put the effort in, and you get more than that amount of energy back. So getting the mind calm is one thing, but getting it concentrated, getting it really solidly grounded with a full sense of the body, a sense of the breath filling the body, that gives you a good foundation. Events can come and go, thoughts can come and go, and they don’t knock you off your foundation. At the same time, you’re opening up your mind, taking your gaze and making it 360 degrees, so that whatever direction a defilement comes in, you see it coming. And that helps with the last step, which is to release the mind, whatever’s burdening the mind, whatever’s holding it down. Ask yourself, “What is the burden on my mind right now?” As the Buddha said, more times than not, it’s something you like, yet it’s pinning you down. It’s your clinging, it’s your craving. Especially when you’re dealing with things that destroy your concentration, you’ve got to see these clingings and cravings. It’s not really worth it. This is where the Buddhist analysis comes in. You see these things as they’re originated in the mind. And then you see them also pass away, and then you see them come back. And you may decide not to go with them, but if part of the mind decides to go with them, then you’ve got to ask, “Why? What’s the allure?” And all too often, the mind hides the allure from itself, or hides the genuine allure. There’s something you may like about jealousy, there’s something you may like about anger, there’s something you may like about lust. But what is it? Track it down. And part of you says, “Of course I don’t.” And another part says, “Well, maybe of course I do,” depending on the particular relationship you have with that particular defilement. But you can’t take “of course” as an answer. You really know that you’ve gained some insight when you find an answer that surprises you. But when you let go of whatever it is you’re holding on to, there’s a sense of release. You know you’ve worked. Your analysis has worked. So, you get to know the mind, you gladden the mind, you steady and concentrate the mind, and then you release it. Those are the things you can do with the mind. That’s your work. That’s how you tend your mind. Take care of your mind. Because we live in this world which is bad for our mental health. Society is not designed for supporting the well-being of our minds. We have to take care of that ourselves. And even if society were a lot better than it is now, we’ve still got aging, illness, and death of the body. This body that we live in is going to be dependent on us for so long. It’s going to say “enough” at some point. And before it says it’s finally enough, this falls away, that falls away, and it doesn’t come with any warning. It often has very little concern for whether losing this particular faculty or that particular faculty is going to come at a convenient time. It’s just simply the fact that you latched on to this body. It means that you’re going to have to learn how not to suffer from that fact. So you’ve got to care for your mind, look after your mind. I find this especially important as you spend time alone. Things will come up that you might not have expected. Well, that’s actually to the good, because you get to see that these are things that were hidden all that time, down in the moldy basements or up in the dusty attics. As long as you have the stability of your mind so that you don’t feel threatened by these things, and your ability to counteract whatever unskillful tendency comes up, then you’re doing your work, what you’re responsible for, what falls to you as your duty. And it’s to that extent that you’re wise.

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