

Responsible for Your Goodness

May 19, 2012

Each time you sit down to meditate, remind yourself that this is the most important thing you can be doing right now. It's the most important skill you can develop in your life: the ability to drop all your other concerns and focus on what really is your responsibility, which is the shape of your mind.

It's so easy for us to talk about how we're responsible for things outside, and that is part of our goodness. But where does that goodness come from? If you're responsible for things outside and yet are doing a horrible job, creating suffering for yourself or suffering for other people, it's nothing to be proud of.

You have to give precedence to the state of your mind so that you can take care of your responsibilities well. But the state of your mind isn't something that's going to be good on its own. It needs training. It needs nourishment, the proper kind of nourishment. All too often we nourish ourselves with thoughts of our own importance, or thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of who knows what. And that kind of food is not necessarily good for the mind because often those thoughts can poison whatever goodness we may have.

The Buddha gives an example of someone who's practicing concentration and starts thinking about how his concentration is better than other people's concentration. And that right there spoils it. This tendency doesn't apply only to concentration. It can apply to anything else you do in life. You do it well but then you build up a lot of pride around it. It's like taking good nourishing food and then sprinkling arsenic or bits of rotten fish over the top.

For the goodness of the mind really to be good it has to come from within: from a sense of its own inner sufficiency, its own inner strength, its ability to nourish itself properly. And then whatever goodness it does outside will just naturally come. It's a natural expression of the mind. It's more likely to be right for the occasion and not harmful to anyone. So to really be responsible you have to take responsibility for this, the state of your mind, right now, and your ability to protect it, look after it.

That means you have to give it a lot of attention. It also means you have to be willing to put aside a lot of other connections in your life.

When Luang Pu Uthai was here these last couple of days, that was one of the things he repeated over and over again: our need to be quiet, the need for restraint, the need to focus on what really is our responsibility, which is the shape of our mind. No one else can do this work for us. You see this when you're dealing with other people. People you love are suffering, and there's something in them that you can't reach—as when someone is really, really sick, or really miserable and really depressed, and yet you just can't reach them. Or someone is dying. You realize that if that person had taken care of his or her own mind, he or she wouldn't be suffering, and we would be suffering a lot less. We wouldn't be worried for them.

Which means that one thing we can do now for the people who will be around us when we die is to develop skill in nourishing the state of our mind.

So this is your number one responsibility, the shape of your mind right now. And the goodness of the mind is something that doesn't need to be decorated. It doesn't have to have a lot of pride or conceit or anything. You may need to develop a certain amount of pride or conceit as you're working on these skills, but as the skills get better and better, you find that pride and conceit are really unnecessary, and they get in the way. You can put them aside because the goodness of the mind in and of itself is its reward.

So we focus on the breath to try to bring the mind first to what the Buddha calls a state of seclusion. Put aside any unskillful thoughts that come up. Try not to get entangled with any concern that they're arising as a blemish on your ego. What the hell, they're here, but you don't have to get involved with them. They're going to come but then they're going to go. You just don't have to get involved. And you learn how to pull away from them. It's not that you're in denial about them, it's just that you don't have to participate in whatever

stories they want to get you involved in. You see them come and then you just watch them go. You've got a place to stand here with the breath, apart from them, so try to make the breath as comfortable as possible.

This is your nourishment along the way to getting the mind in really good shape. This is the energy field in the body that allows the breath to come in, allows it to go out. It nourishes the nerves, nourishes the blood vessels, and allows the body to move. It's our most direct experience of the body, and yet we tend to look past it. We tend to see the solidity of the body as prior, and then wonder how we can get breath to go through the solidity. Actually the breath is already there. As far as our awareness is concerned, the breath is primary. It comes first. The reason why healthy breath energy is nourishing to the mind is because it's so near to the mind. It fills your awareness of the body with a sense of comfortable energy. That energy becomes the medium through which you experience every other aspect of the body.

When that sense of well-being nourishes the mind, you're in a much better position to look at your own drawbacks and not get ensnared in all the stories and back-and-forth recriminations that usually build up when you notice you've been doing something unskillful. That's because you now realize you don't have to identify with those things. They're just there. Causes have created them, and when the causes are removed they'll go away. Of course, one of the big causes that keeps these things going is that you're paying attention to them. You want to get involved in them. So you learn how not to pay attention to them. You starve them. Then all these distractions and other things that pull you away from centering in on the mind don't have a foundation. They slip away, slip away.

Part of the mind will say that you're missing out on something important, but although it's true that there's a lot in the world that you're missing, you're not really missing anything important if you haven't taken care of the mind first. This is your top responsibility. You can't put it off to when you're old. You can't put it off to weekends or to next year's retreat. You've got to deal with it every day, because the mind can create trouble every day.

So you've got to keep riding herd on it. But riding herd doesn't mean that you're harassing it or causing it to suffer. You're actually giving it a sense of well-being and learning how to protect it, how to foster a sense of its value. This is where all our goodness comes from. This is where the potential for the end of suffering comes from. The suffering that we're creating with our minds, right now, is the problem. So you've got to solve the problem where the cause is.

And it turns out that in the midst of this cause there's something that's deathless. Only it doesn't lie in the "midst" of things. It's a different dimension. It's out of space and time. But it's contacted right here. The Buddha doesn't talk much about it. He says it's something you realize by doing the practice.

We were talking today about trying to get our heads around the idea of what this deathlessness might be like. But it's not something you get your head around. You try to get your head around suffering so you can comprehend it to the point where you can develop dispassion for the things that make you cling to it. As for the cause of suffering, you try to get your head around it enough to abandon it. But the end of suffering, the cessation of suffering, is not something to comprehend. You discover it. It's there. And regardless of how wonderful your theories are about it or how accurate your ideas may be about it, there's no way they can touch the actual reality of this potential, this dimension.

But we can talk about developing the path, using the strength we gain from concentration to look into the ways in which we're causing suffering, and learning how to abandon them.

We do this by looking into the most paradoxical habit of the mind, which is that it likes to create suffering. We don't understand why this is happening. We want happiness, we want pleasure, and yet the things we do end up creating so much suffering. We're attached to things that are causing suffering because we don't see the connection—or if we see the connection, we don't think there's any alternative.

So when the Buddha talks about the path, it's to remind us that there are alternatives. Good ones. And when he does talk about the cessation of suffering, he tells us enough to let us know that it's really there and it's really good and it's really worth going for. It's much better than all the other ideas we have about who we are or how great or important we are, or how horrible we are: all these stories where, whether we think we're good or bad, we're making ourselves the hero, we're making ourselves the heroine—none of which are helpful. You need to look into the state of your mind right now. How is it dealing with itself? How is it dealing with its thoughts? Its cravings? How is it dealing with the good parts of the mind? What is it doing to maintain them, to give them importance? Those are the questions you really want to ask and those are the ones you want to focus on answering.

Because by focusing on them, you can find something really good in the mind. When you've got that real goodness, then you don't have to create all the artificial forms of goodness that we build around ourselves, our self-image, our idea of how important we are in this way or that.

This then gets reflected in the way we're generous. The Buddha talks about how the different levels of generosity that come along as we're practicing get higher and higher until finally we get to the state of awakening. Then generosity is just a natural ornament of the mind. In other words, the goodness we do for other people at that point isn't done because we want something out of them, or because we want something out of being good. When the mind has taken care of all of its needs, when it's taken care of all of its inner responsibilities, then everything that's left is a pure gift.

This is why this, your state of mind, should take priority. As for anything that gets in the way, anything that distracts you from this, you've got to put it aside for the time being.

It's like learning a musical instrument. You have to be willing to go off and practice for hours and hours and hours by yourself. You're not playing for anybody else. It may sound like you're being selfish, but No, you're learning how to get really good at what you're doing, so that when the time comes and you actually do go out on the stage, you've got something good to offer. You've got something good for people to listen to.

Like the Buddha: He left his family, and many people get upset about that, thinking he was a deadbeat dad. But you have to remember that one of the ways that a husband or father could provide for his family in those days was to go out on an expedition, go out exploring, and to come back with a treasure. Sometimes it would take years. In this case, the Buddha came back with a really great treasure: the treasure of the deathless. So even though he had to isolate himself from his family—and it did cause them some grief; he himself found it hard to leave them—still, he knew that he had to. And when he came back, he had something that more than compensated for those six or seven years.

So remember this when you find that the demands of the practice pull you away from your family or your friends. It may look like you're being irresponsible, but you're actually taking care of your number one responsibility. And when you do that, everybody benefits.

Whether anybody else appreciates that fact doesn't matter. You know that this is what you've got to do.