

Facing Your Responsibilities

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One of the ironies of our culture is that people who meditate are accused of running away from their responsibilities, running away from life, running away from reality, running away from the world. Actually as you sit here, you're sitting and staring face-to-face with your responsibilities: your intentions from moment to moment. One of the lessons you learn as you meditate is how many defilements you have, how much suffering your intentions can cause. And the whole point of the meditation is to take responsibility for your intentions and learn how to shape them into something better, something more responsible, more harmless—to admit that not every thought that comes into your head is a good thought, and that you are responsible for creating a lot of suffering for yourself and sometimes for people around you as well.

The people out in the world are the ones who are running away from these issues. They get buried in issues of making money and raising a family. Some of that work is necessary but a lot of it is just busy work. As they get old and face death, they look back at their lives and say, "What was that all about? What do you have to show for having been a human being?"

As you meditate, you're making changes in the big issue in life, which is the mind, the activities of the mind. These issues are right here right now. There's nowhere else you're going to see them. People out in the world, for the most part, have trouble sitting still. If they're not busying themselves with something, they feel empty, at loose ends. There's something wrong if you can't just sit with your mind and be quiet.

As we sit here, we're trying to figure out what that "something wrong" is and also figuring what to do about it. The breath gives you a handle, gives you something to do in the present moment so that you can stay here and not feel at loose ends. In the beginning stages it's difficult to look your mind straight in the face, or to even figure out where you would look for it.

So the breath gives you something to do. You work with the breath. As long as you're with the breath, you know you're in the present moment. And after a while you begin to learn a very important lesson: that if you're going to watch the mind, you watch it in its actions. You watch it in the act of dealing with the breath, trying to stay with the breath and then wandering off, coming back, trying to stay with it again and suddenly losing all sense of where you are and finding yourself someplace else.

That's the way it is in the beginning. But as you work with it, you begin to notice that you can observe things in the mind you wouldn't be able to observe any other way: how it changes its mind, how one intention can sneak up on you to sabotage a previous intention. If you're careful, you can see these things. If you're alert and mindful, you begin to notice the tricks the mind plays on itself.

As you get better and better at the meditation, you learn how to undo those tricks, work your way around them, find exactly what it is in the mind that wants to wander off anyhow. You start entering into a dialogue with all your different skillful and unskillful ideas, your skillful and unskillful intentions. And you start

converting more and more of your mind to the skillful side. That right there is an important achievement. Bit by bit you begin to figure out all the different ins and outs of the mind. You develop a greater sense of unity, not only in getting the mind to stay with the breath in a state of good strong concentration, but also in getting more and more of your mind on the side of wanting to do this. That's what right effort is all about, learning how to generate desire to do what's skillful and to drop what's unskillful.

This way you cause less suffering for yourself, less suffering for others. And your life has a very clear sense of direction. There's so little in the world that you can really straighten out, but you can straighten out your own mind. When the mind is straightened out, then the effect that you have on the world is not colored by greed, anger, delusion, jealousy; all those other unskillful states that can come along in the wake even of your generally well-intentioned efforts. Because as long as the mind doesn't really know itself, unskillful states can sneak in in all kinds of disguises.

And the amazing thing is that, as you take time off to be by yourself, the world comes running after you. You see this in the lives of the famous ajaans. Once they've straightened out their own act, lots of other people want to be around them because those people sense the beneficial impact of a pure mind, a mind that has been straightened out, realizing that it's a rare thing in this world. It's one of the things we lack in our culture, which is probably why people don't understand meditators. The more we can straighten out our own minds, the more proof we have that meditation is a useful activity. It's the most important activity in life. Even if nobody else sees the benefits, we see the benefits within ourselves. We can face the end of life with no fear, because we've seen the true Dharma.

As the Buddha once said, that's one of the reasons why people fear death: They're very uncertain about what is the true Dharma. Is there a deathless, is there no deathless? Is death just annihilation? Once you've seen the true Dharma, you have no doubt about it. When there is no doubt about this issue, death doesn't hold any fear.

So realize that as you're sitting here, you're not running away from anything. You've actually got yourself cornered. You've got to face your own mind. As someone once said, there is wisdom in this technique of no escape. Now that you're sitting here, you've got to face your mind: How are you going to train it, how are you going to make this not a miserable experience but actually a blissful, happy, meaningful experience? Those are the skills that most people in the world never develop. But they are among the most important skills that you can develop, because they make life a meaningful life with a direction. A life that, as they say, goes in a good way.