

Duties in the Present

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When we're meditating, we're taking our inner resources and trying to develop them for the sake of true happiness, a happiness that doesn't take anything away from anyone else, doesn't harm their happiness, and at the same time provides us with a happiness that's really reliable, solid, stable and sure. The more happiness we can find inside, the less we need to depend on things outside. The less we depend on things outside, the less we're going to be taking anything away from anyone else.

That's the way the world outside generally is: One person gets something and somebody else has to lose. But when we develop our inner resources, nobody loses. We benefit; the people around us benefit as well.

So what are these inner resources? You've got the body sitting here breathing; you've got the mind thinking and aware. To develop these resources, it's like taking a seed and planting it in the ground. You bring your awareness into the body, and that way your awareness can grow. It's not running around all the time, trying to jerry-rig this little world, that little world, finding that each world collapses, and then running off, trying to create another one. It doesn't waste its time doing those things.

It settles into the body, tries to be as fully aware of the present moment as possible, particularly to be aware of the body, fully aware of the breath, knowing when the breath is coming in, knowing when it's going out, noticing how comfortable it is, how right it is for the body right now.

If you're tired and sleepy, you may want to do some energetic breathing—deep, long in-breathing, short out-breathing—to help keep you awake, to build up your energy. If you're feeling too tense, you may want to breathe in a way that's more relaxing. Check out the state of your body, the state of your mind right now. Experiment to see what kind of breath is good for them.

You can focus your attention in any part of the body where it's easy to see that now the breath is coming in, now the breath is going out, and the mind feels comfortable being centered there.

These are your resources. Try to keep them together: Keep your thoughts with the breath, keep thinking about the breath each time it comes in, each time it goes out. This ability to keep that thought in mind: That's mindfulness. Sometimes we hear mindfulness described as present awareness, but actually the word for present awareness is *sampajañña*: alertness. All-around knowing in the present moment:

That's *sampajañña*. *Sati* or mindfulness is keeping something in mind: in this case, keeping the breath in mind.

As you keep the breath in mind, the Buddha gives further instructions as well. Once you're clear about how the breath feels, he says, then be aware of the whole body breathing in, be aware the whole body breathing out. Then notice what ways you have of building up unnecessary tension around the breath coming in: pulling it in here, or pushing it out there, squeezing different sensations in the body to get the breath in. Allow those unnecessary sensations to calm down, so that the breath can come in and out without your putting any unnecessary or unpleasant pressure on any part of the body.

If you look carefully, often you see this happening. You squeeze certain sensations in certain parts the body so that you feel that this will help pull the breath, but it's really not necessary. The breath doesn't need to squeeze anything at all. It's the movement of energy.

So anywhere where you find that you are squeezing the sensations of the body, back off. Leave those sensations alone. Allow them just to be. The more consistently you can allow them just to be—all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out—the more you find a sense of rapture developing, a sense of ease, fullness, refreshment. This is called developing your inner resources for the sake of alertness, for the sake of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment.

That's one of our duties in the present moment. Actually there are four kinds of things you're going to find in the present moment. The Buddha's four noble truths are right here. We tend to think of the teaching four noble truths as something more abstract. But it's actually a framework for looking at what you've got right here, right now. You've got four things. There's going to be stress or suffering someplace in your awareness of the present. At the same time, there's a mental activity, craving, that's a cause of stress. Then there are mental activities that help put an end to stress. When they're fully developed, you find the noble truth of the ending of stress, which comes about when you let go of the craving, when you feel dispassion for it, when you abandon it.

So there are four types of things to look for here in the present moment, and there's a task or a duty appropriate to each. You develop the path. That's what we're doing right now: developing mindfulness by staying focused on the breath. At the same time, as you get more and more clear about having a consistent intention in the mind, this develops discernment. Discernment is focused on understanding the most important part of the present moment, which is the intention that's shaping how you experience things right now.

When you're meditating, you're setting a very clear intention in the mind that you're going to stay with the breath. Then when you find that you can stay with the breath, you move on to training yourself, as the Buddha says, to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and out. Now, to build up to that, you may want to go through the body section by section first, or you can try the whole body all at once. If you have trouble staying with the whole body, go through the body section by section so that you can get to know it well.

Start around the abdomen. Watch that area of the body for a while as you breathe in, as you breathe out. If you sense any tension or tightness there, allow it to relax. Then move up to the solar plexus and follow the same three steps there, then up to the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the middle of the head, the back of the neck at the base of the skull, then down the spine, out the legs, and starting again at the back of the neck, down the shoulders, and out the arms, so that you get familiar with the whole body, piece by piece. Then you can start piecing it together.

What you're doing is very consciously setting up an intention and trying to maintain it. As for any other intentions that may come in the way, just let them pass. If they knock you off the original intention, then as soon as you realize what's happened, get back to the original intention.

So at the moment we're developing mindfulness and concentration. That's the path. Once it's developed, then you can start looking more carefully into these intentions, because right there in the intention you're going to find the cause of suffering: any craving that accompanies the intention. One of the best ways to notice it is to see if there's any stress coming or going, rising or falling, because these things come and go, rise and fall, together.

So you try to comprehend the stress, comprehend any mental sense of burdensomeness that may come, say, around the pain in the body. That's a good place to practice when there's a physical pain. After the mind has developed a good solid foundation with the breath, then you can notice where there's any stress, any pain in the body. Look at how the mind reacts to it. You'll begin to see that there are a lot of unskillful thoughts surrounding the pain.

Your duty there is to abandon them, because the mind usually doesn't just look at pain. It has a lot of intentions around the pain. Many of them are old habits we picked up way back when, before we could even speak, when we were little babies and we suffered from pain. There was no one there to explain it to us, no matter how much our mother tried to comfort us. She couldn't say, "Now focus on the pain and learn to understand the pain." Even if she did, we wouldn't have understood her. We were just face-to-face with pains, trying to deal with

them whatever way we could think of. Many of our subconscious reactions to pain come from that period, which means they're pretty ignorant.

So now's your chance to back up and unlearn some of those unskillful habits. If you see in any unskillful thoughts surrounding the pain that are contributing to making it more stressful on the mind, then let them go. That's the duty with regard to the second noble truth: abandoning the cause of stress.

The same duty applies to thoughts that surround a sense of mental distress. When you're unhappy about something, the mind can feed, feed, feed on that unhappiness. You don't have only one Greek chorus commenting on your misery, you have many Greek choruses in the mind that make it worse. Your duty with regard to them is to abandon them, let them go. Again, these are old habits we've picked up from way back in the past, from times when we didn't know any better. Now is our chance to know better, to look at unskillful patterns of thinking that may come up in the mind and realize: "I don't have to keep feeding these. I don't have to believe these. I don't have to encourage them." You can just let them go. If they arise again, you just let them go again. No matter how many times they arise, just let them go, let them go. Hold on to the breath. When you keep both hands on the breath, it's hard to hold on to anything else.

If you find a particular way of thinking is obsessive, try to look and see what gratification or pleasure you get out of that kind of thinking. Why does the mind insist that it has to keep thinking in this way? It'll have its reasons, but its reasons don't stand up to the light of day when you really look at them carefully, when you give them a leveled gaze. Then you find it easier to abandon them.

This is one of the things of the breath is good for: It helps make your gaze level, so that you don't always sing along, up and down, with unskillful ways of thinking.

In this way, you have standards for what to do in the present moment. Sometimes we get a very simplistic idea of what we have to do as we meditate: Just let go let go let go. Well, you've got to hold on to something, too. You've got to develop some things, and there are some things you neither hold on to nor develop. You try to comprehend them: If there's stress or suffering anywhere in the mind, try to comprehend it.

As for skillful mental qualities, you don't want to let go quite yet. You've got to hold on. You're holding on to them as a path, as a tool, which is different from clinging. With clinging, you hold on to these things as ends in and of themselves. But here you try to turn everything into tools.

You develop the path by sticking with the breath, developing good mental qualities around the breath. If you notice any stress or suffering, you try to

comprehend it. In particular, look at the patterns of thinking that contribute to that stress and suffering. Those are the things you let go. You don't let go of stress. You let go of the cause.

As you let go of the cause, you get some hint of what that third noble truth, the end of suffering, may be like. Try to appreciate how much nicer it is in the mind, more congenial it is in the mind, when you're not holding on to unskillful thinking, when at least one part of the mind, the observer, can question that thinking and not get taken in.

As you keep this up, ultimately you'll be able to complete the duty with regard to that third noble truth, is that you really realize there is the cessation of suffering, there is an end to all the stress that you're been causing yourself.

So when you come into the present moment like this, remember that there are four things to look for, and that there are tasks appropriate to each. You don't come into the present moment and just try to let everything go. You develop the path. As in that old simile of the raft, you let go of the raft when you reach the other side of the river, but while you're on the river, you've got to hold on tight. Develop concentration. If you feel attached, it's a healthy attachment, because it can help you let go of more unskillful attachments.

When the mind is well centered, then it's in a position to really see where there's stress, what element of craving in your present intentions creates that stress, so that you can let go of the craving, let go of the craving, and finally you get to the point where the mind doesn't need any more intention. That's when real freedom opens up in the mind.

But to get to that point where you can realize that third noble truth, you work on the tasks appropriate to the other noble truths. This way of approaching the present is called appropriate attention. You don't just sit in the present moment or try to be immersed in the present moment. You've got duties in the present moment. This is why the Buddha divides things up in these four noble truths so that you can know which duties are appropriate to which reality you're facing right now.

So keep this pattern in mind. One, it will help you get into the present moment properly, and, two, once you are there, it'll show you what you really need to do to get the best results out of this meditation we're doing right now.