

## *Your One Responsibility*

*September 29, 2013*

One of Ajaan Suwat's most common topics of a Dhamma talk was on the theme that each of us only has one person, i.e., ourselves, that we are responsible for. Now, in having you focus your concern on yourself, he wasn't saying to be selfish in an unskillful way. It's interesting, though, that the Thai word for selfish, *ben kae tua*, can also mean "looking after yourself," and he would often comment on that as well, saying that the Buddha didn't teach you not to look after yourself. You have to look after yourself very carefully. Our problem is that we look after other people, in the wrong way, concerned about their behavior: what they're doing, what they should be doing, and what they're not doing that we want them to do. Then we neglect our own responsibility, which is to look after our own thoughts, words, and deeds.

The passage we chanted just now: "I am the owner of my actions." What are your actions? The things you do intentionally. And you have to look very carefully at that. This is why we meditate, because the source of our intentions is here in the mind, and all too often an unskillful intention has taken over and we've acted on it before we realized what's happening.

It's like shooting an arrow. After you've let go of the string and the arrow is in the air, you suddenly realize "Oh, there's that arrow going out in a direction I don't want it to go!" But by that time, you can't take it back. You want to look at the arrow before you shoot it and make sure you aim it right. In other words, you want to get right here at the breath. This is where the mind and the body meet. Every intention has to go through the breath in order for the body to move. The things that you sense coming in through the bodily senses have to go through the breath as well before they reach the mind.

The breath is like a checkpoint. When things come in, what kind of impact are they having? If you're right here, you'll see. When your intentions go out, what kind of impact are they having? And where are they coming from? Who's aiming them? And where? You want to see all of that clearly, so keep your focus inside. Think of it as developing a lens with a focal point that's actually inside the lens. You get an idea of how you have to keep your attention focused right here if you want to see what you're doing, and catch what you're doing in time.

Mindfulness helps, in that it helps you remember what's going to lead to suffering and what's not. Alertness is what keeps you right here in the present moment: the direct experience of what's happening and particularly of what you're

doing while you're doing it. Finally, ardency is your desire to do it well. You want to focus that desire right here.

As for making changes in the world, if you can do them by maintaining good actions, good words, good qualities of mind, then that's your gift to the world. But your primary responsibility is right here. So you want to learn how to develop this focus—the focal point inside the lens—and learn how to keep it going even when you're listening to other people speak, looking at events outside. Be aware of what's going on inside right here as your main foundation.

The world has a tendency to pull us in. But it's only because we let ourselves be pulled in.

So many times you hear people say “Well, if everybody behaved in line with their innate nature and didn't have any of this awful social conditioning, everybody would be wonderful and fine.” But if we didn't have the potential for greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind, no amount of bad social conditioning would have any influence on us. It's because we've got these potentials in here that outside potentials can pull us in the wrong direction.

So again, you've got to keep coming back here, here, here. This is where the issues are, and this is where problems can be solved. But it requires that you learn to keep your focus here steadily regardless of what's happening outside, regardless of how much you want to change what's happening outside.

The means by which you bring about change are all-important, so always be focused on: What are you doing? What is the intention behind it? That way, you can live in the world without getting scarred, because you realize that your goodness shouldn't have to depend on the goodness of other people.

I was talking with someone who was off in a foreign country one time, traveling alone. It's at times like that when you get to reflect on your life. He was thinking about all the corrupt people in the world, and the realization came to him, “Even though they're corrupt, that doesn't mean I have to be.” He said there was a very strong sense of taking a stance, that it was meaningful, and it was going to give meaning to his life. Regardless of how corrupt people would be in the world—and we look around us and can see that it's pretty insane—we don't have to be insane along with them. We can hold to the Dhamma. The Dhamma is something that doesn't change.

And doesn't harm anyone. I met a monk one time who had been spending many years with Ajaan Mahaboowa, and I asked him what he had learned from his time there. And one of the things he said was that he realized the Buddha's Dhamma is not harmful in any way at all. And that's precisely it: It's one of the few things in the world that really is harmless. As you hold to it, you find that you're

not harming yourself, you're not harming the people around you. You've got a good compass to keep your thoughts, words, and deeds in line.

But looking at the world as Dhamma means you look at the movements of your mind. Those are the important dhammas. You keep in mind—this is where mindfulness comes in—you keep in mind the Buddha's teachings on which qualities of the mind are worth developing and which ones you want to let go. That's what the training is all about.

That way, you can train yourself in all places. It doesn't have to be here at the monastery. In fact, the whole point of the training is that it's something you carry with you wherever you go: in your work, in your life at home. The number one question should always be "What's the skillful thing to do right now? What's the skillful thing to say? What's the skillful thing to think?" As for the various voices in the mind that are giving you different kinds of advice—and they all tend to sound like *you*—you'll start discerning which ones really are in your best interest, which ones are not; which ones are in line with the Dhamma, which ones are not. Learn to dissociate yourself from them if they're not. Even with the good ones, there comes a time when you have to put them aside, too. But for the time being, you want them to be the dominant voices because you need something to withstand the world.

"The world is swept away, it does not endure, it offers no shelter." If you go along with the world and then suddenly discover you've been doing something really unskillful, the world cannot protect you. Your protection is in the Dhamma; your protection is in practicing the Dhamma. The statement, "The Dhamma protects those who practice it": It protects you by showing you how to act in a way that doesn't bring any harm.

So even though there are times when it looks like the world is going to hell in a handbasket, you don't have to go along with them. And the fact that you can't stop them is not your responsibility. Your responsibility is directly over what you're doing and saying and thinking right now. When you decide that this is what you want to protect, you're taking an important stance. It makes the best kind of difference anyone can make.