

Your Primary Duties

January 7, 2018

Focus on your breath, and see what kind of breathing is comfortable right now. You can experiment with different kinds of breathing: long or short, fast, slow, heavy, light, deep, shallow. See what the body needs right now, what the mind needs right now.

As for your other thoughts, put them aside. Even if they have to do with duties you have outside, you can put them aside for the time being, because there are other duties that are more important. You have the duty to comprehend suffering, to abandon its cause, to realize its cessation, and to develop the path. These are duties that nobody imposes on you, but the Buddha said that if you want to put an end to suffering, if you find that you *are* suffering and you want to get out of it, this is what you've got to do.

We live in the world where there are so many other duties pushed on us all the time. Things that this person wants, that person wants, and then we decide that we want. We get all entangled in these things, and it's hard to pull ourselves out. We forget that the Buddha's set of duties is actually more important to us. So it's always important to remember that just because something is pressing doesn't mean it's important. There are times when you have to push even the pressing things aside to say, "Look, my mind needs some space for itself." After all, it's the state of your mind that you can take with you.

There will come a point where you have to put aside all the duties of the world, not because they're finished but simply because you can't carry them out anymore. And then what have you got? You've got your mind. And what shape is it in? If it's been misshapen by all the things that you've done as you've gotten entangled with things in the world, it's not going to be a very good thing to take with you as you go. And it's not a very good mind to live in as you're here. You want to live in a mind that has its own space, that can spread out a little bit.

This is why we practice generosity, why we practice virtue, why we develop the mind, especially in meditation, because it's time for the mind to spread out a bit and assume its own shape, and look after the duties that are really in its own true interest.

As I said, nobody's forcing these duties on you, but there is the fact of suffering. There are the pains in the body, but they're not really suffering. The suffering is what the mind does to itself. It holds on to things and then beats itself up with them. That's what you've got to learn how to undo.

So you want to get the mind quiet so that it can see: Where is the mind picking up things unnecessarily? Where is it stabbing itself, beating itself with those things? How can you stop that? That's an important skill. In fact it's *the* most important skill in life. Otherwise, as you leave this life, you're beaten up not only by things outside but also more importantly by what the mind has beaten up in itself.

So you've got to learn how to step back and see: Where is the mind causing itself unnecessary suffering? How can you stop that? That's in your own true interest. And these are the duties that are good for you. They're not imposed on people outside simply through the force of their desires or the force of your desires. They're imposed on you by the fact of suffering. But when you follow them, you find that they really do lead to happiness. With the duties of the world outside, sometimes you gain the results you want and sometimes you don't. You do the best you can and sometimes things just collapse. But with the duties inside, if you actually follow them carefully and you follow them all the way through, you find there's no disappointment at all.

There really is a true happiness that can be found by trying to understand when the mind is causing itself suffering, why is it doing that? What does it think it's getting out of these things? When you can see the reason why you're doing it, then you can develop some dispassion for the cause and you can abandon it.

You do that by developing the path—like we're doing right now, working on the mind, getting it to stay with one thing. Concentration is an important skill, because it allows you to see what's going on in the mind, to catch the mind in the act when it's causing itself unnecessary suffering.

So it's your choice of duties. To what extent are you going to let the duties of the world run over you? And to what extent are you going to make some space for yourself so that you can follow the duties that are really in your own true interest? Especially in the interest of the mind: to give it some space, to give it some breathing room so that it can really be its own person. And in following these duties, it can find a happiness that's not going to disappoint.