

Your True Responsibility

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The very first time I went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, there was another young monk, a young man from Bangkok who had just ordained. His was one of those ordinations that had been forced on him by his fiancé. She had told him: "If you don't ordain for a couple of weeks, I don't want to marry you."

So he ordained as a monk for a couple of weeks and discovered that he liked it a lot more than he had anticipated. The day before he was to return to Bangkok, he was beginning to doubt whether he wanted to return to lay life. That night Ajaan Fuang gave a Dhamma talk on how when you come into this world you don't come alone. You have your parents, you have other people who nursed you through life, raised you up, and so you have responsibilities to them. The next day the young man went off and a few days later disrobed in Bangkok.

About a week later, I was beginning to feel bad about being a monk: I felt that I was being selfish and just looking out after myself. That night Ajaan Fuang gave a Dhamma talk about how when you come into this world you come alone. You're responsible for your own birth, you're responsible for your own actions, and you're going to be responsible for how you die.

Of course, these two contradictory messages simply showed how Ajaan Fuang could adapt his teachings to the needs of his audience. But of the two, I think the second teaching was ultimately the more true. When you come right down to it, there's a part of you that's totally alone as you come into the world, totally alone as you face your sufferings, totally alone as you leave here. Even when you are with other people, there's an internal dialogue that's just between you and yourself. That's what you've got to be responsible for. The world would be a nice place if we could provide for each other's happiness—and we can a little bit—but for the really deep down parts, we each have to be responsible for ourselves. If you constantly worry about this person and that person, no matter how close you are to them, there's going to be a part of you that gets neglected that you really are responsible for.

This is a lot of what the Buddha's teaching is about: that you've got to take responsibility for yourself. Because who's making the decisions? You can't say, well, someone else made that decision for me or this person made that decision for me, because there's got to be a part of you that decides to go along with those

decisions for whatever reasons. So you have to look at those reasons. This is not to say that believing what other people say is bad. The Buddha never said that, but he says you have to take what other people say and look at what your mind says and then examine both very carefully to see which is more appropriate, which really does correspond more closely to the way things are, the way things should be, the most skillful way of reacting to a particular set of circumstances. If you don't develop your own powers of mindfulness and alertness in these areas, your judgment is going to be clouded, and that's going to cloud your life.

So this is your first responsibility right here. And fortunately we do have the example of the Buddha to show us how it's done. When we talk about taking refuge in the Buddha, it's not that the Buddha is going to come down and do things for us. It means that he's given us an example of how people make their own decisions wisely, skillfully. If you stop to think about the story of his life, it's amazing. He did one of the things society really comes down hardest on. He left his wife right after she'd given birth to a child. I can't think of any society anywhere in the world that condones that. And yet this is what he felt he had to do at that point. It turned out ultimately that his decision was right. He was able to come back and offer something priceless to his wife and to his child: nibbana, arahantship. In the Therigatha there's a poem attributed to his wife, in which she says that all the suffering was worth it because he showed her how to be responsible for herself and to settle all her internal issues as well. The same goes for Rahula. He was able to settle all his issues, too.

That's the highest gift you can give to other people, and you can't give it to them unless you've been able to settle all your issues first. So this is where your first responsibility lies: Straighten out the affairs in your own mind and then you're in a position to be an example to others, to actually explain things to others in a way that they can benefit from.

So when you're meditating, this is precisely what you're doing. You're taking on responsibility for your own mind. We're not sitting here waiting for someone to come in and inspire us or for some light to come floating in that will suddenly clear things up for us. We have to do the work.

This is what the teaching on skillfulness is about. If there's any one issue central to the Buddha's teachings, it's the issue of skillfulness. How do you develop a skill? All of his teachings revolve around that question. Take the Four Noble Truths: They deal with suffering and the end of suffering. What do you do to bring about the end of suffering? In other words, how do you arrange the issues in your mind skillfully so that they no longer lead to suffering?

Even the Buddha's teaching on causality can be compared to modern theories about learning. He tells precisely why it is that people are able to learn. There are feedback loops you can learn from. You've got the quality of attention in your

mind that focuses on this, focuses on that, asks questions, frames issues so that you can work on them. This is not the rote feedback of a thermostat. There's an element of attention and intention in there as well, all of which explains why we are able to learn. It's because we're able to learn that the teaching is useful for us. The Buddha teaches us how to frame our own questions. As we get more and more skillful about it, we begin to get a better and better sense of which questions in life are worth focusing on and which ones are best left aside; which ones are really important and which ones are only secondary.

So when you're meditating, part of the issue is learning how to answer the proper questions. "Why can't I see things clearly in my own mind? Why is everything a mess?" Because the mind's not quiet enough. What do you do to make it more quiet? Work on this question. Then as the mind begins to settle down, settle down, what can you do when it attains a state of stillness? What have you done to get here? What do you do to keep here? As you get more and more stable in that particular level of stillness, is there still a level of suffering or stress in here? When the mind is really still, the word suffering doesn't really apply, but there is stress. Where is it? What goes along with it?

So the Buddha's teaching focuses on how to frame questions, for only when you frame the questions can you learn. That's why you look at your own mistakes, honestly and truly. The Buddha's first requisite, in setting out the criteria for the type of person he was willing to teach, was "someone who is honest and no deceiver." In other words, someone who will recognize his or her own mistakes, admit them, and be willing to learn from them. You have to be able to ask, "Okay, what went wrong here?" You start from the outside and then you take that question deeper and deeper into the mind. You begin to realize how many features of the mind's landscape are not given but are actually the result of choices you have made. You begin to develop a sensitivity for which choices are skillful and which ones are not. Your inner landscape becomes a lot more malleable than you thought it could be. When you ask the right questions, everything gets turned around for the better.

We're working on these two qualities needed to learn: intention and attention. The intention right now is to be mindful. Get the mind to settle down. Attention is watching: is the intention really working or not? If it's not, what can you do to make it work better? This way you learn how to bring these two qualities closer and closer together, more and more clearly as the mind grows more and more still. You can start making better choices. Then, as your level of skill grows really great, you can go beyond even "right" choices. Things genuinely begin to open up in the mind. You see that what the Buddha taught about is really there: There really is a Deathless. There really is an unconditioned. When you get there you realize that your own actions were what got you there.

But at that point even the sense of “you” doesn’t even exist. But that doesn’t matter because what *is* there is the ultimate happiness, the ultimate wellbeing. You know what lead to it. That’s what can be taught to other people: you do this, you do that, this is what worked... When you’re talking in this way, you’re talking with confidence. It’s not just something you read in a book, not some theory you’ve dreamed up. It’s something that actually worked inside you.

Once you find something that worked inside you, you really have something special to offer other people. Your companionship with them is not just the kind of companionship that’s desperately trying to make up for the big hole of loneliness that each of us tends to carry around inside. You’ve been able to work through that lonely hole in yourself so it’s not lonely anymore. It’s no longer a hole. You’re coming from a sense of fullness. That’s when you have something really outside of the ordinary to share with people.

So this is what’s meant by taking responsibility for yourself, for that gnawing sense inside that something is wrong, something is lacking. You look into it to see exactly where it is. You discover that what it comes down to is a huge lack of attention, lack of awareness of what’s going on inside, a kind of a bewilderment. The Buddha said that’s one of the two ways we react to suffering. First, there’s a sense of bewilderment: how does this happen? Then there’s a search for somebody else to help show you the way out. Most of us put those two qualities together in very unskillful ways. But when you learn how to put them together in a skillful way, bewilderment turns into articulate questions; the search for someone who can help focuses on someone who can really act as an example for what you can do. You’ve got the Buddha, the Noble Sangha. So once you take those two qualities of bewilderment and search and begin to use them skillfully, you get to the point where you really have ended the problem of suffering in the mind in all of its manifestations. From that point on when you’re looking to other people, you’re not looking for them to solve your suffering for you. Instead, you’re in a position where your presence is a gift to them. You can do your best to help them to turn their own bewilderment and search in skillful directions.

But the help can be really helpful only when you’ve taken care of your issues first. Those are the issues you’ve been carrying around for you don’t know how long. Those are the issues that each of us has been carrying around for eons and eons. And this is the only way to work through them. The burden in the mind finally gets lifted. That’s when you’ve taken care of what really is your responsibility. From that point on, everything else is purely a gift.