

Carrying Your Duties Lightly

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Ajaan Suwat often called the monastery here, “a quiet corner,” a place where people can get away from the cares of their lives and just be with the body in and of itself; feelings, mind, mental qualities in and of themselves—to drop the general context of work, family, all the narratives that get built up around work and family and other issues outside, and have a taste of seclusion: physical seclusion and mental seclusion, mental seclusion being when you don’t talk about things past or future to yourself. Just stay right here in the present moment.

Now this quiet corner doesn’t just happen. It takes work. For those of us who live here, there are lots of duties to be done in the course of the day: just keeping the place clean, looking after the orchard, looking after the electrical system, the truck, the kitchen. So where do we go for our quiet corner? This is where we really have to look into mental seclusion. Because when you work, it does require narratives. You’re doing *this* because *that* needs to be done. There’s a connection between past and future, present and future, past and present. It’s built into the nature of the job. But you have to learn how to wear that lightly.

This means two things. One, when you’re meditating, you have to learn how to cut it off. While you’re sitting here with your eyes closed, keep reminding yourself that those narratives have no meaning right now. If you find your mind weaving another strand in the narrative, just cut it. There’s a temptation to say, “Well, let me finish this particular strand and then I’ll cut it.” Of course, that strand leads to another strand leads to another strand and never gets finished. So learn how to cut off thoughts mid-sentence, when they’re still unresolved.

There are various ways you can do this. One is to remind yourself that death could come at any time. Those fires off to the south: Some weird wind could come up and just blow right through the monastery, blow the fires right through the monastery and that’d be it. Or those earthquakes they’ve warned us about could happen. Or something in your body could malfunction a little bit. It doesn’t take all that much, you know. Death could come at any time. And when you die, you don’t want your mind involved in thinking about tomorrow’s meal, say, or planning down the line. Because at that point, those thoughts are useless. Remember that question that’s asked, “Given that life passes by, passes by, what are you doing right now?” Well, you want to be in the present moment as much as possible.

There’s that image in the suttas about the monk’s proper range or the meditator’s proper range. You go outside of your proper range and you’re in danger. One is story of a quail. It leaves the field where it’s safe, where there are clods of earth and stones that it can hide behind. It’s out someplace else, and a hawk swoops down and gets it. The hawk carries it off, and the little quail bemoans his lack of merit, saying, “If only I hadn’t wandered off from my ancestral home, the hawk couldn’t have caught me.” The hawk is a little miffed at that. So he lets the

quail go and says, “Okay, you can go where you want, but you won’t escape me.” So the quail goes down to a field where it can hide behind clods of earth and stones. It actually gets up on top of a stone and it taunts the hawk, “Come and get me, you hawk! Come and get me, you hawk!” The hawk swoops down again, but just at the last minute, the quail hides behind the rock and the hawk breaks its breast on the stone.

In other words, when you stay in terms of body in and of itself; feelings, mind states, mental qualities in and of themselves, you’re safe. The in-and-of-itself is what helps cut through the narratives.

Sometimes you’ll notice even as you sit here breathing that there’ll be a connection between one sensation in one part of the body and another sensation in another part of the body. Learn how to cut through that, because that may be the beginning of a thought-world, or it may be the beginning of a network of pain through the body. You can learn how to cut through, cut through, cut through. Breathe in a way that just cuts, cuts, cuts these things back. You’ve really got to be relentless with this, because the mind has this habit of making connections. It’s like vines that grow a little bit, a little bit, a little bit and then they entangle you.

So when you sit down here, remind yourself that you’re cut off from the rest of the world and you’re also cut off from these little worlds that you have a tendency to build inside. Learn how to get outside them and look at them simply as processes. As for the narrative of the work you have to do, the narrative of your responsibilities, think of that as a narrative you can take on and then drop at any time. You really need practice with doing that, because otherwise the narratives come in and eat into your meditation, eat into the mind, and leave you with no concentration.

Get in touch with that part of the mind they call “your face before you were born”: in other words, the part that has no knowledge of these narratives, doesn’t give them any reality. Learn to look at these narratives as if you were another person in your mind looking at them and saying, “Gee, that’s a silly thing to get involved in.” Tomorrow you may have to get involved with it again as part of your responsibility, but for right now it’s something you don’t want to get tied down with. The mind needs its freedom. That’s its most important need. This is why we work for nibbana: true freedom, ultimate freedom. But in the meantime, we try to create the conditions for whatever conditioned freedom we can manage.

In Thai they have the word *wat*, which has several meanings. There’s *wat* which means the monastery and then there’s *wat*, spelled differently, which means your duties in the course of the day. And as Ajaan Fuang would often say, “Your most important wat is the inner wat, the duties of the mind. The wat outside, your responsibilities in the monastery: Those have to be secondary.” If you see that the secondary ones are interfering with the primary one, drop them for the time being. Just stop. Re-establish your inner duties, your inner contact with the breath,

your inner contact with just being in the present moment, and try to carry that around as much as you can.

This is the other way of dealing with these narratives. You try to cut them off as you're sitting here formally meditating but you also try to wear them lightly throughout the day. I.e., think about them only when you really have to. As soon as a necessary thought or a necessary decision has been made, drop everything, and go back to the breath. If you're going to carry anything around, carry the breath around, carry your awareness of the body around. So even though you may have to take on the narrative to do your job, you take it on lightly.

In this way, you can establish mental seclusion even in the midst of responsibilities, even in the midst of all the narratives involving this person or that person, this duty or that duty in the course of the day. Look for the spaces between the narratives and make the most of them. Keep reminding yourself that you've got to defend yourself against the mind's tendency to spin complicated and entangling narratives around things. Learn how to cut the entanglements and look for the spaces between things. Keep those spaces. If you're going to connect anything, connect the spaces.

And wear your responsibilities lightly. That's how you maintain your inner quiet corner, regardless of the situation.