

Responsible for Your Actions

May 28, 2017

Start with a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Think of the breath as refreshing the whole body. Then adjust the rhythm and texture of the breathing so that it feels just right. Experiment a bit. It's like fixing food. You taste it and then decide if it needs more salt or less salt or this spice or that spice until you get the taste that's just right. Because concentration is food for the mind. It's nourishment for the mind. It's what gives us strength.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about how he first got on the right path to practice. It was when he divided his thoughts into two sorts. If the thoughts came from sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness, he would try to prevent them because he knew that they would lead in the wrong direction. As he said, when you start thinking about things those thoughts bend the mind. They're like ruts in the mind. The more you think in a certain way, the more you're likely to act in that way. As for thoughts that were imbued with renunciation, goodwill, or compassion, he allowed himself to think those thoughts.

Notice that he was looking at his thoughts not in terms of whether he liked them or not or whether he was in the mood to think in a particular way. He looked at where the thoughts came from and where they were going. They were part of a causal process. But then he said he noticed that even if you let the mind think good thoughts all day long, you'll start getting tired, so he rested in concentration. One of the reasons he rested in concentration is because it's even better for the mind than the thoughts of compassion, goodwill, or renunciation. Another reason was because it gives you the strength to go back after you've left concentration and continue this process of not getting hooked by your thoughts, not getting hooked by your likes. But to look at your thoughts in that way, to step back from them in that way, requires strength. Because our habitual way is to identify with whatever comes up and if it appeals to our greed or aversion or delusion, we just run with it. That's a sign of weakness. Strength is when you're able to step back and say, "Where's this going? Is it going in the direction that I want it to?"

What we are doing as we meditate—in fact with the whole practice—is that we're taking responsibility for our actions: for what we do, what we say, what we think, to make sure it comes from a good place inside and leads to something good outside. Which means that we can't let our moods take over.

We can't let our greed, aversion, and delusion take over because they're irresponsible. They don't care. In Ajaan Lee's image, you're actually being possessed by these things. They take over and they do what they want, just like those stories of possession you hear in Thailand. Someone is suddenly possessed by a spirit and starts saying and doing things that that person would never say or do. Then the spirit leaves and escapes responsibility. And whether you believe in

possession of that kind or not, what you notice is that you start saying things under the influence of greed that you would never say if there wasn't any greed. The same with anger. Same with delusion. When these things take over, they're irresponsible. You're being irresponsible. Wouldn't you rather be responsible, in light of the impact that our actions actually have on our own happiness and the happiness of the people around us?

If we look for happiness that's dependent on making other people suffer, it's not going to last. If you want happiness that lasts, you've got to take responsibility both for the things you think and for things you do outside in terms of their impact on yourself and on other people.

So we practice concentration as a strength. It gives strength to all our other resolves.

The Buddha talks about five kinds of strength. The first one is conviction. Formally, that's conviction in the Buddha's awakening. What does that mean for us? It means we're convinced that true happiness is possible and that it can be achieved through human effort: in other words, conviction in the principle that your actions will make a difference. If you don't believe that, then you don't really care. "Why would I bother being responsible? Or responsible to the extent that I didn't want to harm anybody at all?"

Conviction is what gives you the strength to carry through with the persistence that's needed to keep at this process of sorting through your thoughts, sorting through your attachments, and figuring out which ones you actually want to act on, which ones are beyond the pale. It's like sorting through the committee of your mind and figuring out who should actually have the right to vote and who should not.

To do this, you have to be mindful to keep that perspective in mind, that you want to look at your thoughts not simply in terms of what you like or don't like but where they come from, where they're going.

Concentration gives strength to that because you're learning how to develop a sense of well-being inside. All too often, the reason we go for something unskillful is because we're hungry. We're weak and we see the potential for getting a little hit of pleasure by doing something unskillful, so we go for the quick fix instead of thinking about the long-term. But when the mind is well fed with concentration, you can think in terms of the long-term much more easily.

It's like poor people: Sometimes all they can think about is, "Where's the next meal, where's the next meal?" Whereas when you're well fed, you can start thinking further down the line. "If I eat this way today, what's it going to do to my body? Where's it going to take me? If I take this, if I do this, where's it going to take me in the long-term?"

Then when your concentration is solid, it not only gives you strength but it also forms a good basis for discernment so that you can see things clearly as to what will be skillful and what will not. You clear things away in the mind as much as you can so that you can sense, when you're doing something, if it actually is causing stress and suffering or if it's not. Because we move from harm in a larger sense to something more subtle here: the stress that comes from

craving, the stress that comes from clinging. You need the mind really to be clear in order to see this level of stress. If the mind isn't clear, then it just goes on its usual blurry perceptions of what's going on.

It's like trying to test a cloth that's hanging over a line. If you want to test if it's dry, your hand has to be dry. If your hand is wet, you can't tell whether the cloth is wet or not because simply by touching it you make it wet. The same thing with figuring out what's skillful and what's unskillful in the mind: You've got to get the mind as clear as possible, as still as possible, to see clearly, operating on the principles of conviction in your actions and right view about what you want to look for in terms of what the problem is inside the mind i.e., the stress and suffering you're causing for yourself unnecessarily. To see that, the mind has to be really still. Even though you're not totally free from greed, aversion, and delusion you've cleared away a lot. In other words, your hand is relatively dry. And the more you can clear away, the more you can tell for sure.

When we develop these strengths in the mind, they actually turn into what the Buddha calls faculties. Or at least we translate that in English as faculties. The word *indriya* in Pali is related to Inda, the god who's in charge of one of the heavens. You're making these strengths stronger and stronger so that they take charge in your mind. They're the ones that are responsible. Lack of conviction is irresponsible. Lack of persistence, lack of mindfulness, lack of concentration, lack of discernment: These things are all irresponsible. And you can't be apathetic about being irresponsible in that way, because it's your happiness that's at stake.

You want a happiness that lasts, which means it has to be a happiness that doesn't harm anybody. It has to come from your actions, so you have to be responsible for your actions.

So in practicing, we're taking these potentials for good qualities in the mind and we're strengthening them. As for whether other people in the world are going to be responsible or not, that's their issue. When you're responsible for your actions, you're protecting yourself. They can affect you outside, but if you learn how to really take charge of your own mind, their actions will not have an impact on your mind, which is where it matters. Because everything does come from the mind. As long as the source is in good shape, it doesn't matter if your body gets battered or your wealth gets taken away, because you've got something inside that you can protect that's going to create more goodness down the line. And learning how to think in the long-term like this is something you can do when the mind is strong. So even though people may say that when you're meditating you're being irresponsible, just running off and looking after your own mind, that's not true. You're the one who's actually being responsible in a way that leads to genuine well-being.