

Take Responsibility for Yourself

October 11, 2018

While you're sitting here in meditation, you're dropping all your other responsibilities in the world outside, but that doesn't mean you're being irresponsible. You're actually taking responsibility for your mind: where it goes, where it stays, which intentions you're going to follow, which ones you're going to put aside. You're not letting these things happen willy-nilly.

When the Buddha talks about mindfulness as a governing principle, it's very telling that he doesn't describe it as simply watching things arising and passing away. He says if there's anything skillful that you haven't given rise to yet, you're mindful to give rise to it. And once it's there, you're mindful to make sure it doesn't pass away. So we're not just passive observers. We're making choices, and we're responsible for those choices.

The people who say that the Buddha taught no free will at all: I find it hard to see how they can make sense out of the teachings, because the Buddha's always talking about the choices you're making, how important they are, and how you need to learn to develop your attitude toward your actions as a skill. You may notice that you have some good intentions, but you can't leave them just as good. You have to test them to see if they're really skillful.

When he started out teaching Rahula, he taught Rahula to look at his intentions, and then look at the actions. If the intentions were good, you could follow through with them, but if the actions gave bad results, you were to take that as a lesson: What you thought was good was not. If they give good results, you can remember that, too. Take that as a lesson as well, and adjust your actions accordingly. Take joy when you are doing things right, and come down a little hard on yourself when you're making mistakes. But don't just come down hard. Learn from the mistakes and do your best not to repeat them. That's in the outside world.

Then when the Buddha teaches some of his most advanced lessons on how to contemplate concentration or how to analyze your concentration in terms of its emptiness of disturbance, it's the same principle. You realize the disturbance is coming from your actions—what you're doing right now—and you learn how to drop whatever action is causing the disturbance. That way, you get the mind into deeper and deeper levels of concentration as you get more and more sensitive to what at first seemed undisturbed but after a while you begin to realize still has a disturbance in it.

So you're taking responsibility for the mind in trying to be more and more skillful. Go beyond just good intentions. Make them skillful. And develop the skills of concentration. Develop the skills of mindfulness. Always take time to reflect: When things don't go well in the meditation, what are you doing? Is there something you can change? Don't just get upset by how bad the meditation is. Ask yourself: "What am I doing?" When the meditation goes well, let it go well, and as you come out, ask yourself: "What was I doing?" If you're really mindful, you should be able to remember what you were doing up to the point where things began to settle in, so that you can remember that and apply it the next time.

So we're not here at a crap shoot, just taking whatever happens to come, trying our luck: Is our luck going to be good tonight or not good? We take things in hand. And the habits and the attitude that make you responsible as a meditator actually come from outside, the way you act outside. The meditation and your daily life should inform each other—as in that principle where the Buddha's teaching Rahula simply about how to look at his actions, and then we find it developing into a principle that's applied to the highest levels of meditation. The two areas are directly connected.

The way you live your life is connected to the way you meditate, so you want to look carefully at how you live your life. Are you responsible? This is one of the things that's really stressed in the forest tradition. Everybody in the monastery has to have a strong sense of appreciation that the things at the monastery were all given by somebody. They're all the result of someone's generosity, so you want to take good care of them. You always clean up after yourself, and if someone else has neglected to clean up after him or herself, well, you clean up after them. If everyone helps one another this way, it becomes a much nicer place to live, and you develop good qualities.

I found out after I'd been with Ajaan Fuang for a while, he'd made a comment to someone else when I first went to stay with him. Here was this strange Westerner coming in. He had no idea where I was from. But he told someone else that one of the reasons he took me on was because I was always looking for things to clean up. If his spittoon was full, I'd take it out and empty it. If things were badly arranged, I'd arrange them. Sometimes I got into trouble because I arranged them in ways he didn't like, but at least I had the habit of wanting to be helpful, and he saw that as a quality he wanted to encourage. That was the quality that made him convinced, okay, this would be someone he could teach.

So look at the way you go through your daily life. Are you cleaning up after yourself? Little things like that really do make a difference. You can't say, "Well,

this kind of work is lowly and that kind of work is higher.” Cleanliness is good wherever it is. Neatness is good wherever it is. And if you have this all-around attitude to be responsible for your surroundings, then when the time comes to sit down and meditate, you’re going to be responsible for what’s going on in your mind. And you begin to notice the little things. If you’re not noticing little things outside, there’s no way you’re going to notice the even littler things happening in the mind—little quick movements of the mind that are unintended but reveal a lot about what’s going on in deeper levels.

So try to take a responsible attitude. We’re living here, as I said, off the generosity of others, which means that we should take good care of their generosity. Make sure it stays in good shape. Make sure it stays clean and neat. After all, you want to create a clean and neat mind. If your mind is a mess, how are you going to straighten things out? How are you going to even see what needs to be straightened out?

And don’t be afraid of being obsessive. Even though Ajaan Fuang noticed that I was clean, he found ways in which I was not clean enough by his standards. He would talk about how meticulous Ajaan Mun was. Ajaan Mun would take little rags that people had tossed away here and there, gather them together, stitch them up, and make a little cloth for wiping feet. In other words, nothing went wasted. Everything was kept clean. Even the rags for washing the feet, wiping the feet, were kept clean. Things that in most Thai households are allowed to be dirty, he would make sure were kept clean. If the junior monks weren’t doing it, he’d do it himself to set a good example—because there is a quality in meditation that has to be a little bit obsessive too. You have to keep looking and looking and looking to see where in the mind are you causing yourself suffering in ways that you don’t really have to. If you’re not really meticulous about this, you’ll miss everything. Little signs will be there, but you won’t see them, and yet you’ll wonder why your meditation isn’t progressing. Well, you’re not being sensitive enough. You’re not paying careful attention enough. So try to develop that attitude of paying careful attention both inside and out.

This is one of the reasons why in the old days in the forest tradition things were not all that explained. You had to look at what other people were doing. If you weren’t sure what to be doing, well, watch when someone else there who has more experience is doing something like that. How do they do it? Observe. Learn to be observant, and you pick up a lot of unintended and unexpected lessons.

Another comment Ajaan Fuang made when I first went to stay with him to really practice with him, was that every meditator has to think like a thief. When you’re going to steal something from someone’s house, you don’t go up to them

and ask, “Okay, where is this? Where is that? Where do you keep your valuables? When are you going to be away so I can come into the house safely? How do I undo the lock?” You have to observe things on your own. You can’t expect everything to be handed to you on a platter.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how that was Ajaan Mun’s attitude. There were a lot of things he just wouldn’t explain because he didn’t want you to get used to the idea everything had to be handed to you, everything had to be explained. He wanted you to figure things out on your own. That then becomes one of your own qualities, this ability to figure things out on your own, to be willing to test what you figured out so that you can gain a sense of when you’ve got it figured out right and when you don’t, and then how you can make adjustments when you don’t. You’re taking responsibility for yourself. That’s what the practice is all about.