

The Range of Our Responsibility

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One of the most basic distinctions we get confused about is what's our responsibility and what's not our responsibility. There are a lot of things in the world that we would like to change—and we try to change—but it turns out they're not our responsibility. And the things that we are responsible for get neglected.

One of the reasons we practice is to straighten that out, to get a clearer sense of where we actually have choice, where we have responsibility, and to focus on that.

Basically, it's what we do with the body, what we say with our speech and what we think with the mind: That's our responsibility.

And all of this comes out of the mind in the present moment. That's why we focus our meditation on being more and more clear about what's going on in the mind in the present moment. Because even within the mind, some things come popping up that are actually not our responsibility right now: a thought that comes passing by, or a sound or a smell. It's old karma. You can't really prevent old karma from showing its results, but you do have the choice: What do you want to do with this set of possibilities that your old karma presents?

On the one hand, you've got the breath here, which is the result of old karma. And you've also got thoughts coming through the mind. Which are you going to focus on? You do have the choice.

Some thoughts coming through the mind are actually helpful in encouraging you to stay with the present moment. They can be anything from the thoughts that direct your thinking to the breath or your attention to the breath, or the thoughts that encourage you. This is a really important part of the meditation that often gets overlooked: learning how to encourage yourself, to remind yourself, "This is something really good and you have the ability to do it."

There was a sad story I heard one time of a meditator who was having problems in her meditation. She went to see her teacher, and the teacher said, "Reflect back on your virtue; reflect on your generosity." His meaning was for her to remind herself that she did have virtue and she had been generous. But she started thinking, "Well, the fact that my meditation isn't going well is a sign that I haven't been virtuous and I haven't been generous." She got into a real downward spiral. The teacher should have explained more, saying, "Remind yourself that you do have virtues, you do have the qualities of a person who's been skillful, who's honest, who has integrity. In other words, you've got what it takes to meditate."

That kind of thinking is helpful. And if you find that you need it, go ahead and think it. It's not the case that all thinking is a distraction. The thinking that encourages you to stay with the breath, the thinking that finds the breath interesting, wants to know more about the breath, wants to know more about what's going on in the mind, why it is that even though we want happiness, we do things that cause suffering: That kind of thinking, that kind of inquisitiveness is really encouraged.

It's interesting to note that when the Buddha was teaching, he really did open the floor to questioning. He was always happy to get good questions that focused on the practice. He wasn't the sort of teacher who just gave a teaching and let it go at that or didn't take responsibility for his words. If anyone had any problems understanding what he had said, he'd be happy to answer questions. When people were having problems in their meditation, he'd be happy to answer their questions.

So any questions that were related to the practice of developing skillful qualities of mind or abandoning unskillful qualities of the mind: Those were questions he would encourage.

Even at the point when he was about to die: Before he said his last words, he gave the opportunity to the people present to ask him any questions they might have about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, the path, or the practice. He made that offer up to four times. First three times: "Anyone who wants to speak up can speak up." The fourth time he said, "Maybe you feel embarrassed to speak up in front of the other people. In that case, just turn to a monk next to you and ask him." That was to show that he was serious. He really wanted to clear up people's doubts.

And the kind of questioning where you're wondering, "What about this part of the path?" Or, "What about that part of the path?" Or, "How do I handle this?": Those kinds of doubts are not classified as hindrances. They're actually an important part of developing right view and right resolve. When you realize something doesn't quite make sense or you're running about against the wall, you do want to question it.

When I was with Ajaan Fuang, he would encourage me to question myself first to see what I could come up with. And when I'd pretty much exhausted my ability to figure out a solution, then I could take the question to him.

So there are types of thinking that are helpful—and particularly the thinking that focuses on what you're doing: what's skillful, what kind of action is skillful, what kind of words are skillful, what kind of thinking is skillful.

When you're dealing with the breath, what kind of breathing is good? And how do you relate to the breath? Where do you focus? How do you conceive the

breath? What kind of perceptions do you have related to the breath? If you think of the breath as the air that you draw in and out of the lungs, does that help the mind to settle down or does it form an obstacle? Are there other ways you could think about the breath?

I always found Ajaan Lee's recommendations to think about the breath as an energy flow in the body to be really helpful, because in that way, the breath is always there. Just the fact that you sense that you have a body—when you close your eyes, you know where your arms are, where your legs are, where your torso is, where your head is: All of those sensations can be seen as an aspect of breath.

And the question is: Is this good breath or bad breath? Is the breath tied up in knots or does it flow smoothly? You find that interesting.

And I personally found it most interesting when there was pain or when there was an injury or an illness of some kind—or just discomfort in the meditation. How could you change the flow of the breath to help deal with those problems?

There was one time I injured my foot, so I was focusing on the sensation of the foot around the injury. I felt that helped to some extent. But then I also found that if I focused on the same spot in the other foot—the injury was in the left foot and I focused on the right foot—that would help as well. Or I could think of the breath energy flowing down from the leg past the ankle, past the heel and past the injury and out the toes: That also helped. Or I could think of the breath coming in and out right there at the injury: That helped as well. There are lots of ways you could play with it, I found.

This way, the mind gets more interested in the present moment. What's actually going on in this mind-body complex? And what possibilities do you have of actually making a difference? Again, this gets into that question of what you're responsible for and what you're not. You are responsible for your perceptions, the labels you put on things, how you think about things, how you focus: That's something you can do something about.

As you work with the pains in the body, sometimes you find there are things you can't do anything about. So you learn how to accept it as really strong past karma. And your willingness to learn that lesson: That's present karma. That's something that's up to you.

So the whole meditation is an extended lesson in that one question: What are you responsible for and what are you not? As you learn these lessons in the meditation, you can apply them to the rest of your life as well.

We live in an imperfect world. If our past karma were better, we'd probably be living in a better world, but this is the world we've got. But there is still an element of freedom with each moment. You want to learn how to take advantage of that,

to make the most of that potential. After all, we're already shaping part of the present moment and we're also shaping the future by our choices right now. So you want to make sure that your standards for your choices remain high. It's a mistake to say, "Well, this world is imperfect, so I'll just lower my standards for what I do." That doesn't help.

You have to learn how to accept, on the one hand, the way things are, things that you can't change. The way other people behave, the way the body's aging, when illnesses come up: There's only so much you can do.

But on the other hand, you have to accept that you can choose how to focus on things, you can choose where to focus, how to perceive it, what to do so that the mind doesn't have to suffer.

In other words, there is that element of freedom with every moment. And the more you take advantage of it, the greater your freedom becomes—and the closer you get to uncovering the real freedom that lies deeper inside. So be very careful about how you choose to think and act and speak, because this is where you discover your freedoms.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha encourages us to think primarily about actions. Questions about what the world is, where it comes from, the beings of the world: We talked about this today under the topic of objectification. Those are the kinds of questions the Buddha would have you put aside—not because they're not serious, but simply because they get in the way of what you're really responsible for. He says learn to look at things instead in terms of actions.

The first question he recommended you ask when you go to a teacher was, "What's skillful? What's not? What will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What would lead to my long-term harm and suffering?"

The whole emphasis is on action, action, action—the choices we make—because those choices have consequences.

And it's in exploring this freedom of choice that the ultimate freedom is found.

The range of our responsibility includes that possibility. So try to explore that, and see how far that question can take you.