

Responsible

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There are a lot of people who say that when you meditate you're looking for happiness in a selfish way. That's really not the case. You're training the mind; you're taking responsibility in an area where only you can be responsible. You're responsible for your actions, and where do your actions come from? They come from the mind. So, if you want to act in a responsible way, the mind has to be trained, because it has lots of unruly thoughts, unruly cravings. You've got to get them under control, and this is something no one else can do for you. You've got to do it yourself.

Of course, you're not the only one who benefits as you get your mind under control. Other people are less subject to your greed, aversion, and delusion. And would these people not want you to look for happiness? What are they looking for? They have their idea of what the world should be like, and they'll be happy only if the world is a certain way and if you fit into their view of the world. But there's more to you than your role in their world. You're an agent—you act—and you want to act in a skillful way.

If they say you should be out there acting in the world and not sitting here watching your actions in the mind, it's like saying that people off alone practicing the piano are being selfish; they should perform for others. But you practice the piano so that your performance will actually be good to listen to. The world is all too full of people who are performing for others without having practiced. If that were a matter of performing the piano, you have an idea of what kind of world that would be like. And this is the world we see: performers with no practice.

So you're looking at your own mind, taking care of the things that only you can take care of, to deal with the problems that you face, that only you can learn how to deal with skillfully. There are a lot of areas where other people can't come in and help you. You have to face a lot of things on your own.

Think of the story of King Koravya. He's been talking with Ven. Ratthapala, the young monk who came from a wealthy family but decided to go forth. The king is curious: Why? Other people go forth to the homeless life because of loss of relatives, loss of wealth, loss of health, but none of these things were true of Ratthapala. So Ratthapala tells the king of the four Dhamma summaries he learned from the Buddha. These were his reasons for going forth. Now, regardless of whether you go forth in response to them, they are good reasons for wanting to

practice, because they show the condition that we're in. If we're looking for happiness, what do we have to depend on? Where are the dangers?

First principle: The world is swept away; it does not endure. Ratthapala gives the example of how you really can't depend on your body. In the case of the king, when he was young, he was strong. He felt that he had the strength of two people. Now he's 80 years old and, as he himself admits, when he means to put his foot one place it goes someplace else. So, one, you can't depend on your body.

Two: The world offers no shelter; there's no one in charge. There's no one to protect you from pain. People can give you sedatives, painkillers, but there are a lot of pains that even the medicines can't handle.

In the case of the king, Ratthapala asks the king, "Do you have a recurring illness?"

The king says, "Yes." He has a wind illness, which usually meant, in those days, shooting pains throughout the body. There were times when he was lying in bed suffering, and his courtiers and his relatives were standing round thinking, "Maybe he'll die this time, maybe he'll die this time."

Ratthapala asks him, "Can you command them to take part of that pain, share that pain, so that you don't have to feel the pain all alone and you can feel it less?"

"No," the king says, "I have to feel it all on my own."

So you can't depend on the people around you. There's a part of the mind where even the people with the best intentions can't get in to take your pain away.

Three: The world has nothing of its own; one has to pass on leaving everything behind.

Here the king objects: "What do you mean, 'nothing of its own'? I have lots of wealth."

"But." Ratthapala asks him, "can you take that wealth with you when you die?"

And the king says, "Of course not, I have to leave it behind."

So we know that, in this life, we're going to be faced with situations in which we can't depend on our body, we can't depend on the people around us, we can't depend on our wealth. Then what do we have to depend on? As Ratthapala points out, something very undependable: The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving.

He asks the king, "You've got this wealthy kingdom over which you rule. Suppose someone were to come from the East and say, 'There's another kingdom with lots of wealth. Its army is weak; you could take them.' Would you go into battle to seize that kingdom?"

The king says, “Yes, of course.” Here he is, 80 years old and he’s just been made to reflect on the fact that he’s old, subject to illness, he’s not going to be able to take this wealth with him when he dies, but still he wants more.

“How about if there were a kingdom to the West? Would you take that?”

“Yes.”

“To the South?”

“Yes.”

“To the North?”

“Yes.”

“Across the ocean?”

“Yes.”

The human mind is insatiable, and this is where the real danger lies. If you can’t depend on things outside and inside, you’ve got this wild card of craving. What are you going to do? Other people can’t train it for you. You have to train it yourself.

So as you meditate and try to bring your cravings under control—bring your distractions, all the random and loose thoughts under control and learn how to shed them—that’s when you’re really being responsible. And again, no one else can do this for you, which is why you really have to focus on the areas where you are responsible. Make sure you take care of those.

This is one of the reasons why the precepts are limited in their focus. You’re not going to be asked to go out and prevent all killing, or to ban all stealing or all illicit sex going on in the world. You’re asked to stop doing these things yourself, in the cases where you would actually do them yourself, and to stop trying to get others to do them. That’s where you’re responsible. Keep your focus there, in that area, because that’s where the work has to be done.

As you think about the precepts, you realize that they all come down to your intentions, and that brings the focus even further in. This is why we meditate, getting the mind to be intent on one thing and learning how to stay on that one thing that you’ve decided will be the focus of your intention.

Of course, the training is not simply a matter of what you’re doing when you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. You also have to look after your mind as you go through the day. This is what sense restraint is all about. After all, the choices you’re going to make, the actions you’re going to do, will depend to a great deal on what you bring into the mind and how you bring it in. That’s what restraint is all about: How are you looking at things? How are you listening to things? And what are you looking at? What are you listening to? Why?

Because the “how,” the “what,” and the “why” are all important. The “what,” of course, will just determine what kinds of stuff you have cluttering your mind as you sit down to meditate. The “how” and the “why” will be a matter of whether you’re actually strengthening your defilements as you go through the day or learning how to weaken them. If you let your greed, aversion, and delusion do the looking and the listening, they’re going to get strong. And then, as they’re strengthened, when you sit down to meditate, you have a bigger enemy to deal with.

So, as your frontline defense, be very careful about why you look for certain things, why you listen to certain things, and, as the Buddha says, do this from a position where you maintain mindfulness of the body. In other words, take the breath with you as you go through the day, so that the restraint is not onerous—you don’t feel hemmed in.

This is one of the big problems as we go through the day. We’re very strict with ourselves and then, after a while, part of the mind rebels. We feel, “Oh, maybe the mind needs some time on a long leash.” This is where you *really* have to be careful, because sometimes you let it go a little bit and it goes hog wild because you still haven’t learned the right touch.

Restraint of the senses should be something, ideally, that you engage in all the time, which requires the marathon approach. In other words, you don’t zip as fast as you can at the beginning of the race. You realize that this is something where you’ll have to be in for the long haul, and that requires a pace that you can maintain. So how do you ride herd on your senses without having a sense of being hemmed in?

It’s only then that you get a sense of momentum, and the practice can pick up momentum and be strong. Otherwise, you build up a certain amount of skill and then you squander it, and at the same time you miss a lot of lessons. Because when that urge comes in and says, “I need to look at something else, I need to listen to something else that’s outside of the Dhamma,” you have to ask, “Why?” If you don’t challenge that voice in the mind, you never learn about it. You simply say, “Well, this is the way I am; this is the way the nature of the mind is,” and those things get left unexplored.

Again, you become a slave to craving. The only way you’re going to get out of that slavery is if you resist. Just say, “No, I’m going to stick with my restraint,” and see what reasons the mind gives, because these are the reasons that can make you willing to give into greed, give into aversion, and give into delusion. They’re nothing else but the defilements.

Now, as Ajaan Mun says, it's only to be expected that we slip off the path every now and then to begin with. But that's a sign that we're not on the path in quite the right way. We haven't learned how to make the path something we can live in. That requires skill. You say No to a particular defilement, when it wants to look for a little something to get angry about, or something to get greedy about, and you learn how to say No in a way where you don't feel hemmed in.

This requires that you understand the reasons for why it's not good to go there, and you acquiesce to the reasons. This means a large part of the committee of the mind has to be on board. So it's not just a simple matter of putting up a fence; you also have to reason with the mind to get your attitude right—thinking about the sights of the world, and the sounds of the world, not so much as your playground but as an area where you have to be very careful.

At the same time, learn how to protect the sense of well-being that can come from staying with the breath inside, or at least having a still center as you go through the day. Learn how to enjoy that. Find a rhythm of breathing that feels right: not too long, not too short. Some people suggest something between five and six seconds for the inhale, five to six seconds for the exhale. Try that out, make your own adjustments, so that you have a sense of well-being as you go through the day, and then the hungers of the mind will seem a lot less persuasive.

It's in this way that you're responsible: responsible for the intake of the mind, and then, once things are there in the mind, you're responsible for how you use them and how they come out in your actions. This is something that only you can be responsible for.

As I said, you do this primarily for your own benefit—because nobody else is going to be able to protect you from the suffering that comes when you're not responsible—but it's not selfish. Other people will benefit too.

So practice well. Practice your scales. Practice day in and day out so that when you perform, the performance will be something that's really pleasant to see, pleasant to hear, both for you and for the people around you.