Your No. 1 Priority

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Training of the mind is a major undertaking. It’s not the sort of thing you can stick into a two-week retreat or half hour every day. It has to become your prime priority, your number one priority in life, if you’re going to get real results. Otherwise, so many other things can come in and get in the way of the training, not only in terms of taking up time, but also just disguising a lot of the issues. You become so obsessed with this, so obsessed with that, that you miss the mind that is obsessed with this, obsessed with that. So the object of the training, the mind itself, gets obscured, gets pushed back into the background. There’s so much in our own society that doesn’t value training the mind at all. So we have to fight with that as well, setting a set of priorities that goes against the general flow. The rest of the world may be heading in one direction, but we’ve decided we’re going to go in the other direction. That requires constantly reminding yourself what you’re about, what your priorities are, what’s really important in life. It’s good to come out to a quiet place like this. It’s where your priorities are easier to see. You sit here alone under the trees, and a lot of the issues that seem important when you’re around other people suddenly fade away because it’s the mind’s relationship to itself. All the attitudes and all the members of the committee and the mind, how they’re getting along, you realize that that’s a big issue. If they’re not getting along, if there’s no real order among them, no real sense of priority, then there’s no way you’re going to find any happiness in any way at all. So this has to be your number one priority. But then there comes the issue of the situation of your life. We all come to the practice with our own karma. Some people have opportunities for lots of time. Other people don’t have that much opportunity. Or in your own life, you’ll find it switching from one to the other. Lots of open time to meditate, alternating with periods where there’s not that much time. So when you’re dealing with obstacles like that, this is where patience comes in, realizing that we’re here for the long term. And you can’t expect perfect situations. You can’t expect a perfect environment all the time. You do your best to provide the best environment for the training. But there are some cases where past karma is such that you just can’t have those ideal situations. And when you really come down to it, where in the world is an ideal situation for meditation, there’s always something lacking, always something in excess. So you have to have patience, but you can’t let the patience turn into complacency. This is an important point. Some people say, “Oh, patience is a virtue. Okay, let’s just really get laid back here.” That doesn’t work at all. Patience as a perfection is one of the Paramis’ virtues. It has to be paired with persistence. You stick with the causes. What it comes down to is patience with the results. But you get really energetic about the causes, the practice, and you’re avid in looking for every little opportunity there is to practice, to work with training the mind. And sometimes the emphasis has to be there on the little, when the situation outside is really bad. There’s a tendency just to give up and say, “Well, in a situation like this, all I have to do is just kind of grit my teeth and bear it.” But you discover that even in bad situations, there’s always a little opportunity here and a little opportunity there. And it’s the details that make all the difference, even if it’s simply the question of how you’re breathing as you go through certain experiences, as you go through certain situations. Don’t overlook those things. This is why so much of the training for monks is in details. The proper way to wash a spittoon, the proper way to wash a bowl, the proper way to dry the bowl, fold the cloth. There’s so much emphasis on the detail because it teaches the mind to start looking for the times when it’s getting sloppy. And you begin to realize that as you get sloppy in little things like that, you’re going to be sloppy in bigger things, too. But if you pay attention to the details, each little opportunity to be mindful, each little opportunity to get the mind settled with the breath, to work with the breath, they add up if you take the opportunities. And if you’re persistent and keep looking and looking, the Buddha said the mind should be like a bird in a cage. Actually, it wasn’t the Buddha. It was someplace in the commentary, but it’s a good piece of Dharma. A bird in a cage, always looking for every little opportunity when that cage door is going to be open. And as soon as it’s open, it’s out. That’s the kind of mind that’s going to find its way out past suffering and suffering. Because we said a lot of these obstacles are past karmic obstacles, commitments that you have, relationships that you have, responsibilities that you have. But every moment is composed both of the past results of past karma and present karma and the results of present karma. So that’s always your opportunity right there. Sometimes it’s just your reaction to events is the only present karmic input that you can do. But, okay, look into that. Make sure that it’s skillful. And again, there’s always the breath. Each breath is new. Each breath is an opportunity for new karma, for how the mind is going to relate to the breathing. This is something where you are totally free, no matter what the situation. No one can force you to breathe in an uncomfortable way. No one can force you to breathe in a way that repels the mind from the present moment. Then, as you get to know the breath energy in the body, not just the in-and-out breath, but the way the whole energy field flows through the body, you can be in the most unlikely circumstances and really bliss out at how just good it feels to have the energy flowing properly. Nobody else has to know. This can be your own little secret. You’re sitting there with a sense of fullness and refreshment as the breath comes in, fullness and refreshment as the breath comes out, and you get a stronger and stronger sense that you don’t have to be the victim of circumstances. But again, this requires that you look for each little opportunity to make the most of the breath. So it’s a combination of carrot and stick. On the one hand, the carrot is the skill that you develop in the breathing, your ability to relate to it, to savor it the same way that you would savor good food. On the other hand, the stick is the reminder. If you don’t look for opportunities right now, where are you going to look for opportunities? If you don’t take advantage of the little opportunities as they come, how are the big opportunities going to make their way to you? This is what patience means. You do the best with every moment. The persistence there is the “every moment” sign. Sometimes your best is not going to be ideal, but you do your best, because you know the results, even if they’re not immediate, are going to accumulate over time. There’s a cumulative effect that keeps building, building, building the mind, both in terms of the results and in terms of the habits you’re developing, the mind that looks for those little opportunities. I remember being with Ajahn Fuen, and there were some times when there was an issue he wanted to bring up with me. He just kept waiting, waiting, waiting for the right time to bring it up, because it might be something that I might react very negatively to, especially if it was pointing out something that I was doing wrong or had been doing wrong for the past several years living with him. Finally, I decided it was time to bring it up. Sometimes you see the slightest pretext. Some conversation topic was brought up, or some incident came up, and bam, there he was, right there. He decided this was the time. It’s that bird looking for the opening in the cage. You’ve got to have that attitude towards the opportunities that present themselves to you. Don’t overlook the little opportunities, because they’re there all the time. It’s learning how to content yourself with what you’ve got, but to make the most of it. That way, patience doesn’t turn into complacency. Effort doesn’t turn into impatience. There’s a steadiness to the practice. There’s a clarity to the practice that comes when you realize certain things are past karma and certain things are present karma. Present karma is under your control. When you can see the difference, understand the difference, then the whole issue of patience and energy, patience and effort and persistence, sort themselves out. You don’t just sit waiting around for when the ideal circumstances are going to come. Who knows? You may die before those ideal circumstances come. You want to die in a moment when you made a skillful choice, when the mind was alert, when the mind was following good habits. If death has to come, we’ll have it come in a moment like that. Remember, when death comes, it’s not going to be an ideal moment. It always seems to come in the middle of things. It gets in the way. But when the time comes, you’re going to have to go. You have to let go at that point. Let go of everything. You can’t argue. You can’t negotiate. Death is going to be a very unideal moment. So a lot of the practice is learning how to deal with moments that are not ideal. Because, again, if death comes in a moment, there’s a part of your experience that’s going to die. Feelings die. The body dies. Perceptions, thought constructs, sensory consciousness, these things all die. But there’s also something that doesn’t die. If you’ve been careful in looking for openings, and it’s a very subtle opening there, you have a better chance of going in the right direction. So, because our practice aims ultimately at managing a moment which is very far from ideal, it only makes sense that you learn how to practice with situations that are not ideal at all, or not quite ideal. It’s looking for those little openings. That makes all the difference in the world.

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