Top Priority

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There’s a passage in the Canon where Deva comes down to a monk and advises that he should devote himself to sensual pleasures. And she says, “Don’t devote yourself to a far-off goal and miss the immediate happiness that can be had.” And he says, “I’m not devoting myself to a far-off goal.” He says, “I’m devoting myself to the immediate present, the happiness that can be found in the immediate present.” And that Deva exemplifies an attitude that we find too often among people who meditate. We think of the results of the meditation as something far-off, whereas the result of the meditation is that the concerns of day-to-day life are more pressing and more immediate. So we have to attend to them first. Meditation is for when you have spare time. But that’s got everything backwards, as the monk shows. The meditation is concerned very much with the present moment, the good of the present moment. And the good of the present moment doesn’t happen on its own. That old phrase “present moment,” “wonderful moment,” is a lie in the sense that it’s not automatically wonderful. You have to make it good. It’s up to your immediate input right now that’s going to make the present moment good. And so what input are you putting in, based on what resources? This is what the meditation is for. It’s for developing those resources. So you have to attend to your resources first, your concentration, your mindfulness, your basic energy level. That has to be first priority. If that gets pushed back, then when are you going to deal with all the affairs of the world, all the affairs of daily life? What strengths do you have to offer? And you may feel that you owe it to the people around you to attend to their concerns first. But they can see when you’re beginning to get frazzled, when you’re beginning to get worn out. The quality of your work suffers. The amount of help you can give them suffers as well. This is one of those rare things when looking after your own well-being also is, at the same time, looking after the well-being of other people. The more energy you have, the more solid your mind is, the more you have to offer. So keep that in mind. It’s the training of the mind that has to have the first priority, because everything comes out of that. At the same time, when it has first priority in that way, it can develop a momentum because it becomes more and more continuous. The training of the mind is 24/7. There’s a continuity. There’s a momentum that builds up, which you can’t have when everything is chopped up and squeezed into this corner here or that crack there in your life. So when we’re sitting here with our eyes closed, that’s simply one node on this long line of practice, developing habits that you should then take with you as you get up from the cushion, get up from the floor, and go through the rest of your life. When you find the mind wandering off, what do you do now? And how is that different from what you do outside? If there’s a difference, you’ve got a problem. We’re working on habits that you need to use day to day to day, moment to moment. In other words, the meditation teaches that if you want to make something out of your life, you have to be clear about what you’re doing, clear about what your intention is. And then if you notice something wandering away from that intention, then you don’t go there. You realize that it’s a waste of time, a waste of energy, and it’s blocking the things that you really want out of life. So keeping track of the wandering mind is not something you do only while you’re sitting here. It’s something you want to do throughout the day. Dealing with the hindrances is not something you have to worry about. It’s not something you work at only when you’ve got your eyes closed or that you only have time to do while you have your eyes closed. You have to watch out for them all the time and learn to counteract them. Give the mind a home base. Make it a comfortable place to stay. All the time. Keep tending to that. Watch after that. When something goes wrong with the breath, be sensitive to it. Again, try to keep your sensitivity of your breath going all the time. It may seem like a lot to ask for, that you’ve got to focus on your work and you’ve got to focus on the sense of the breath in your body. But again, it’s the body, it’s your energy that you use to do the work. So you’ve got to look after your resources. And it’s possible that you develop a different sense of what’s important, but you always also can develop a different range of skills as well. You look at most of what’s going on in your mind in the course of the day. The mind is like this huge control room with lots of information coming in from all sorts of directions. And you’ve got this monitor who’s trying to decide which information is worth looking into and which information is best blocked out. And we have certain habitual ways of worrying about what that person is thinking. We worry about what this person is thinking, what they’re going to do to me if this doesn’t happen. And a lot of that is just pure garbage. And when you learn to drop the garbage, then you have more mental space for the information that’s coming in from the breath. It’s saying, “Hey, something’s wrong here. Something needs to be looked after.” So it’s not just a matter of taking care of your technique, but it’s also a matter of getting your priorities right. What information really is worthwhile? Changing your habits. As long as you waste your energy on dead-end information, the meditation is going to get bogged down. The energy level in your mind is going to get bogged down. Then you can’t really handle anything properly. The range of information that you can handle gets smaller and smaller because your energy grows less and less. So at the very least, you’ve got to look at the meditation as a way of maintaining your energy level. The energy of the breath, the energy of the mind when it feels well-rested. It’s important that this has first priority. When you get skilled at this, it’s not just one more obligation placed on an already heavily obligated day. It’s a principle for clearing out, for sorting out what information is useful, what information can be put aside, what tasks are really important, which ones are less important. So the skills that you’re developing as you meditate have to have first priority all the time. And you have to remember them all the time. Don’t just leave them here in the monastery, or leave them here in the meditation hall. Stick them under the table, pull them out when time comes to meditate again, like a cushion or a bench. That’s not the proper attitude at all. You want to soak them in so that wherever you go, you’re carrying them with you. That way they can show their real benefit, an immediate benefit, and a benefit that builds over time.

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