Actualizing Your Potentials

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There’s a school of psychology that believes that people are happiest when they actualize their full potential in all areas of life, spiritually, physically, financially, intellectually, emotionally. What that actually produces is very harried and frazzled people. If you try to excel in every area and try to fully realize all your different potentials, you wear yourself out. Human life is too short. The amount of energy we have is too limited. What this means is you have to figure out what’s important in life and focus your energies there. As for the other things you have to do, anything worth doing is worth doing reasonably well. You need a clear sense of priorities. Otherwise, you’re going to get lost. Everything gets done to a small extent, a certain extent, but you find yourself pulled in so many different directions that you yourself get torn apart, overextended. So the first lesson in bringing Dharma practice into your life is to simplify. You have to prioritize. You find that by focusing on doing fewer things, you actually get more accomplished. Years back, when my brother was in business school, he started out the semester in business and realized that the amount of work he was asked to do was humanly impossible. It required that you stay up to weird hours of the night. Of course, if forcing yourself that much and pushing yourself that much, the quality of your work was going to get compromised. So he realized what the professors were doing. They were presenting him with a real-life problem. It was that you were always going to have too much work presented to you. And discernment lies in realizing what has to be done and what can be put aside, what’s important and what’s not. It’s a good lesson for any businessman and, of course, a good lesson for any Dharma practitioner. As the Buddha pointed out, he taught only one thing. He focused on one main issue, which was the issue of suffering and how to put an end to it. That, he said, is the big issue in life. If you can take care of that issue, then you’ve really accomplished the best thing a human being can accomplish. The other things that get taken care of are subsidiary. So an important part of practicing is looking at your life and seeing where you’re taking on too many responsibilities, trying to actualize too many potentials, and seeing what it is in your power to cut away, or at least to push off to the sidelines. This is a decision that each of us has to make as we learn what’s important and what’s not. There’s no one clear answer across the board. But, of course, the issue of suffering keeps forcing itself on us. And it’s important that we understand where it actually comes from, because that helps us prioritize. As the Buddha said, the real suffering, the suffering of the mind, comes from craving and ignorance. Specifically, there are three kinds of craving. Craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. It’s not that he said that all desire is bad. In fact, the desire to get rid of skillful qualities and the desire to encourage skillful qualities, that’s part of the path. We’re not here just watching things coming and going and arising and passing away in a passive way. We want to understand arising and passing away so we can figure out how unskillful qualities keep coming back to the mind, so we can try to put an end to them. We also want to understand how skillful qualities like mindfulness and alertness can be nurtured so we can strengthen them. These are the big issues in life. In other words, figuring out which desires are good and which ones are bad, which ones are useful and which ones are actually the problem. And that means we need to be able to have time to look at our own minds. So you have to ask yourself, how does your life help in giving you that time, in giving you that space? And you look at your life realistically and you realize there are some areas where some jobs really are pressing. They impinge on the amount of time and energy you can give to this project. In which case, you have to learn how to bear those responsibilities lightly. Not that you’re irresponsible, but you don’t carry them around in your mind all the time. You have a sense of how to let them go, when to let them go. We were talking the other night about learning how to take a vacation from yourself as you meditate. When you come to the meditation, you often bring in the issues of the day. An important part of concentration practice is learning how to get out of that mindset, that little world of becoming, and create concentration as a type of becoming instead, in which you are a different person. A person with different desires, different concerns. So at the very least, you have time to put those burdens aside, so that your mind isn’t deformed by carrying the same weight around all the time. The workers you see in Thailand at the boat docks, the guys who carry huge loads off the ships, their bodies are bent all out of shape from carrying loads all day long. And for many of us, that’s how our minds are, bent out of shape, carrying the same load day after day after day, without ever really putting them down. So part of the practice lies in learning how to put those things down. See your identity in your job, in your family, the other identities you take on in the course of the day. See them as alien worlds, strange worlds, exotic worlds, so you don’t get sucked into the values that those identities and their attendant worlds carry with them. But it’s not enough just to learn how to be able to put them aside for a while. From time to time, it’s also good to have a certain amount of detachment from them, even as you’re working on those responsibilities, taking on those jobs. Try to develop a sense of the mind as an observer, watching separately, so that you’re not totally sucked into that particular world. You’re not totally sucked into that particular identity. You realize that it is an identity that you’re assuming. It’s a role that you play. With actors on the stage, when they play a role, the difficulty is learning how to get into the role. In real life, though, our difficulty lies in learning how to get out of the role. You play the role convincingly and responsibly, but you need to have a part of you that’s part of the mind that’s outside and separate, so that when you suffer setbacks in the course of the day, not all of the mind is suffering the setback. Part of it can just watch, like an anthropologist watching the values of a strange society, empathetic, trying to understand. But at the same time, realizing that they are strange. They’re not part of the innate nature of who you are. Because who you are is a construct, it’s a fabrication. And as long as you understand that, it’s a lot easier to step out of those various roles that you play. And those various identities that you assume. Whatever setback that particular identity suffers, it’s not necessarily a setback for all of you. This way, you learn how to wear your responsibilities more lightly. And when you can do that, the demands of each of your different identities are easier to prioritize. You’re not totally sucked into the worldview that each identity carries around. You’re not totally sucked into the idea that each identity has to be perfected, that you have to work at its actual potential. This myth of having to actualize your full potential is one of the biggest burdens you could carry around. And it’s good to learn how to put it aside. Keep reminding yourself that what’s really important is understanding how your mind creates suffering, no matter what the situation. Because even though things can get pretty dire, the mind isn’t totally in there, in that world where they’re dire. Awareness can step back and look at it and realize that the perceptions and the feelings of that world, if you pull them into the mind, can cause it to suffer. But you don’t have to pull them into the mind. When you keep that sense of distance, then you can deal with setbacks a lot more effectively. Remember that the most important thing is to learn how to act in a skillful way, i.e., with the minimum amount of greed, anger, and delusion. Try to be as harmless as possible. After all, whatever responsibilities we’ve taken on, whatever jobs we’ve taken on, there’s a constant refrain in the forest tradition that the work of the world never ends. People retire from their jobs, not because they’ve completed the job so that no one has to do it again, but simply because they’ve run out of strength, run out of interest. But the work still needs to be done, simply because someone else may or may not pick it up. So the world is never going to be perfected. Of course, we’re all going to pass on from this particular state of becoming. This particular human life, on to another life. And what are you going to carry with you? You’re going to carry with you the qualities of the mind you’ve developed. In particular, the insight you’ve gained into the workings of the mind, how it causes suffering, and how it can be trained not to cause suffering. That’s going to be the most valuable lesson you’re going to take with you. So that should have top priority. Try to give yourself as many vacations from your various identities as you can manage. And don’t be afraid to take on the identity of a meditator. How many times have I heard that you’ve got to drop your identity as a meditator so there’s no self in there at all? You’re not going to be able to meditate until you are secure in being a meditator. A wise meditator is someone who has a good sense of how far you can push yourself at any particular time and when you have to pull back a little bit. When you’re squeezing the quail in your hands to the point where it dies, or you’re holding it too loosely so that it flies away, what’s the right amount of pressure you want to put on the practice at any time? That’s the part of being a skilled meditator. That’s a good identity to develop. Have that among your repertoire. A meditator can look at the various identities you have in life and see them. As I said, as an anthropologist, I would see the worldviews and customs of a foreign culture, both inside and outside. And then if you can learn how to carry that sense of being just a little bit outside of all your other identities as you go through life, you find that they weigh less heavily on the mind and you’re developing an important skill. But the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of discernment, lies in just this ability to have a sense of what’s really important and what’s not. Back in the time of the Buddha, there was a list of the hot issues of the day. Is the world eternal? Is it not eternal? Is it finite? Is it infinite? Is the life force the same thing as your body, or is there some separate life force? What happens to a person who is fully awakened? Does that person still exist or not, or both, or neither? People would come to the Buddha with this list of questions, and he refused to answer or take a stand on any of them. And they’d get really upset. They thought he was being irresponsible. But he said that those questions, and trying to find an answer to them, don’t really lead to awakening. Nowadays, we have different lists of questions. It might be useful to sit down sometime and ask yourself, “What are the questions that you have been living by?” With a belief that you have to get an answer to them. And then ask yourself, “Are those questions really important? Do they help understand suffering, or do they get in the way?” When you start looking at your life in terms of the Buddha’s priorities, it starts getting a lot easier to sort things out as to which duties you have to take very seriously and which duties you can get by with doing them reasonably well, which potentials you have are worth developing and which ones are not. As I said, time is limited. Our energy is limited. So you want to focus at all on the work that really is important. Make sure that gets done. If you have any spare energy or spare time left over beyond that, fine. But make sure that your top priority gets the time and attention that it deserves. you

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