Worth

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Human society has some strange ways of measuring the worth of a person. Even in the Buddhist monkhood, back in the time of a John Mun, a John Lee, a John Foon, the powers that be in Thailand, or the powers that were in Thailand, wanted monks to be socially relevant. Starting schools, engaged in other activities, but particularly starting schools, teaching in schools. They actually had laws to force monks to settle down, take on the role of teachers. The king had gone to Europe and seen how powerful Europe was, and realized that a lot of their power depended on their educational system. So he wanted a national system of education and came back and said, “How are you going to do that from scratch?” You get land from the monasteries, and then you get the monks to teach. And as they teach the kids, the kids get older and they go to teaching colleges, and then they begin to replace the monks. But during that time when the teachers were the monks themselves, a John Mun had to go into the forest. This is one of the reasons why he had to leave the Northeast and go into the North to get further and further away from Bangkok, out of the purview of all those laws. So from the point of view of the society, he was a worthless person. He wasn’t doing his job. He wasn’t performing his duties. And the same applied to his students. Think of a John Foon up in the North during World War II, just meditating alone. Living off the alms of the hill tribes. Looking at him, he seemed to be a totally useless person as far as society was concerned. But then in later decades, when Westerners came to study in Thailand, where did they go? Did they go to the education monks? No. They went to the students of a John Mun. Those people who had been denounced as worthless. Because they saw that there was something of a definite value in people who had trained their minds and could offer advice on how to train your mind. So as you’re working on the practice, have a strong sense that you’re doing something important. It’s not the kind of importance that’ll get written down in history books or recognized by people around you. But it is important in a much deeper way. Your contribution to the world is based on your thoughts, your words, and deeds, and the extent to which they’re motivated by greed, aversion, and delusion, or the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion. And so whatever extent you can chip away at your defilements and develop the perfections in their place, you’re making a contribution. The world needs more people who have trained their minds. You look at the world around us right now, all the people who are socially relevant, the people who are powerful, abusing their power horribly. People who are wealthy are not happy with their wealth. People who are famous are not happy with their fame. Think about that blessing we chant at the very end, the standard blessing for the meal. “Ayutmanna Sukhambalam.” Long life, beauty, happiness, strength. Those things, if you get them, but you’re deluded, can often be very harmful. Old people get tricked. All those phishing schemes that are out there to catch old people as they get older. It’s not the case that they get more intelligent, they begin to wear out, and they do crazy, stupid things. Their people are beautiful, and then get trapped by their beauty because of their delusion. They’re popular for a while, then as the wrinkles begin to appear and other signs of aging begin to appear, they get more and more desperate for confirmation that they’re still attractive. And the people who can take advantage of that can have a field day. People who are endowed with all kinds of happiness, all kinds of pleasures, know instinctively that these things can be taken away from them at any time. And so they just grab on more and more. People who are strong can often abuse their strength. So these blessings of the world are blessings only when you have discernment. So whatever you can do to increase your discernment, it’s all for the good. That’s your contribution to the world. Whether people appreciate it or not, that’s something else. But you want to be able to look into your own mind and see if there’s something of worth in here. And whether it grows fast or slow, that’s not the issue. And John Lee makes a comparison between different kinds of trees, banana trees, oak trees grow very fast, but they die very fast. Oak trees, teak trees, hardwood trees, they grow very slowly, but they’re lasting. So when we’re practicing, it’s not simply a matter of getting the mind into concentration and getting the states of bliss that come from concentration. It all depends on the qualities of the heart, the qualities of the mind. By the Buddha terms, the seven treasures, or the later tradition identified as the ten perfections, there’s value in all these things. And you have to learn how to appreciate it. You have to learn to make sure that your values are not necessarily the values of the world around you. That’s what it says when you listen to the true Dhamma. You reflect on it. Do you see that it really is something desirable to practice? And then he says there’s a willingness. What that means is that you take the principles of the Dhamma and you’re willing to take them on as your standards. And then you compare. The word he uses for comparing can also mean to judge. You look at what standards you picked up from the world and you have to sort through them. Which ones you can keep as part of the practice, which ones you have to put aside. There has to be a real sorting out. Think about it, Chan Mun being attacked for not following Thai customs and Lao customs. He realized that there are some customs that he picked up from his society that were good, but there are a lot that were opposed to the customs of the noble ones. So you have to learn to be impervious to the criticisms when he was actually following in line with what the noble ones would do, what the noble ones would advise. This is a constant theme. The practice is counter-cultural. Because what is our culture about? It’s about having more babies, keeping the culture going, and actually cultivating greed, aversion, and delusion. Look at our economy. What is it based on? It’s based on greed. And see where it takes us. We’re on the brink of world war because of some very greedy individuals, the ones that society extols. So you realize you’re living in a crazy society. You can’t take their values as yours. If you want to be sane, if you want to have a healthy sense of what’s really valuable in human life, so always try to be heedful. Which means you have to look at the ways in which you’re intoxicated. The Buddhist definition of intoxication is in the precepts. It’s fermented and distilled drinks that cause heedlessness. Heedlessness is when you don’t care about the long-term. consequences of what you’re doing. You just want to do what you want to do. You just want to do what you want to do. You don’t have to think about consequences. And even when you’re not taking what’s recognized as intoxicants, there’s the intoxication of youth, there’s the intoxication of health, there’s the intoxication of life itself. In other words, when you’re young, you can’t imagine yourself being old. You’ve got lots of time between now and then, so there’s all kinds of things you can do with your youth. When you’re healthy, you don’t think about the possibility that you could be sick. So you abuse your health. The same with life. You say, “I’ve got a long time before anything’s going to happen. I’ve got lots of time to do what I want. Then maybe as I get older, then I can think about practicing the Dharma.” But you never know. Kids can die very young. You can die when you’re in your teens. You can die when you’re in your twenties, your thirties, your forties, your fifties, sixties, on up. The question is, what do you have to take with you when you go? The qualities of the mind. Everything else you have to leave behind. So work on what you can take with you. And the thing is, when you work on good qualities of the mind, you don’t take them all with you. You leave behind a good example in the world. A person who takes self-training seriously, because part of self-training is virtue. You’ve been harmless. Generosity. Whether you have a lot of material things or not many material things, the fact that you can be generous with your time, your energy, your forgiveness, what you know of the Dhamma. And sometimes being generous with the Dhamma doesn’t mean teaching the Dhamma, it means simply living by the Dhamma. That’s a good example. In developing the qualities you can take with you, you’re also leaving behind a lot of good things in the world. Think about the people who are being stole right now. They’re leaving behind death and destruction. So who’s going to be more worthwhile?

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