Perspectives & Priorities

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The ideal life for practicing the Dharma is one where you can find solitude. Now there are many levels of solitude. There’s physical solitude, mental solitude, and what the commentaries call solitude from your paraphernalia. In other words, the possessions of the mind, the defilements in the mind. The Canon talks about the first two. You get away from other people, and it’s easier to see your issues. Because when you’re with other people, their issues tend to take over. And what’s pressing for them, and what presses on you from them, may not necessarily be all that important or that useful for you. So it’s good to get away, to find some quiet time. So you can look at who’s paddling around with you, inside, or who you’re paddling around with. The Buddha says we tend to paddle around with our cravings. So you want to be able to look at them, and see that you really don’t want to have a friendship with them anymore. As John Sowell would often say, we have things backwards. We regard suffering as an enemy, and our cravings as our friends, not realizing that the cravings lead to the sufferings. Or in John Chah’s image, craving is like the tail of a snake. Suffering is like the teeth. We look at the tail, and we don’t see any teeth. So we think it’s okay to catch the snake by the tail. But they’re connected. You catch a snake by the tail, it bites you. So to get back to a John Swat’s image, we have to learn how to see craving as our enemy, and suffering as our friend. Because we can learn from suffering. We learn about the mind, how it relates to your pains, how it relates to the disappointments in life. And you begin to see the power of your perceptions, that there are certain ways of perceiving the pain, as being totally separate from your awareness. In which case it can be there, but your awareness is not affected. This is why meditation, the seclusion that we develop, is not only based on tranquility, but it’s also based on insight. You begin to ask questions about what are the perceptions you have around pain. And they may be pretty primordial, because many of them we developed back before we even knew language. We had ways of communicating with our own minds that didn’t have language. And so some of the images we have around pain, our understandings around pain, come from that time. And as long as they’re not questioned, they’re going to operate and have power in your mind. This is why some of the questions sound strange. Is the pain the same thing as the part of the body in which you feel it? Normally you would say no. But if you actually look at how you approach pain, you realize that that’s how you see it. So you remind yourself. Your sense of the body is what the Buddha calls form. Pain is something else. It’s a feeling. The body is made up of sensations of earth, water, wind, fire. In other words, salinity, liquidity, energy, warmth. But the pain is something else. Just try to look at it that way. We’re going to ask ourselves where is the sharpest point of the pain. And for most of us we run away from that sharpest point. But if you turn on it and chase it down, you find that it moves around. If you keep following it and showing that you’re not afraid of it, after a while the pain will separate out from the body. It will separate out from your awareness. We’re going to ask ourselves, is the pain solid? Or does it come in moments? Look at it carefully and you’ll see that it does come in moments. And it doesn’t have a shape. Its shape changes all the time. Because after all it’s not a physical thing. It’s a feeling. And when those moments arise, are they coming at you or are they going away? These are some of the questions you can ask. If you have the energy, which is one of the reasons why concentration is also an important part of the seclusion, just getting the mind really quiet. So it can gather its energies. The concentration of the tranquility, that’s the settling in and the stillness. The insight comes from asking questions. Now you want to make sure the questions are well informed. Because it is possible to be in seclusion and start asking some useless questions or talking to yourself in useless ways. You can think of the Buddha’s image of the man in the tower. Secluded from the people below, looking down at the people below. And standing up in the tower, if you’re not informed with right view, you could come up with all kinds of ideas about the people you see down in the ground below. He says ideally you want to develop a sense of Sanghveka and also a sense of compassion. But some people are separating themselves out from humanity. And looking at humanity as large, get some other weird ideas that are not that helpful. It’s like that cartoon where there’s a group of people standing on a viewing platform up on a skyscraper. And there’s an anteater among them. And the anteater turns to one of the people and says, “Doesn’t this make you feel hungry, looking down?” That’s because the anteater sees everybody’s ants. And ants are food. So some people, when they get separated from the rest of humanity and are alone, they see humanity as food to feed on. So you want to watch out for that tendency. You have to remember that you’re one of them when you’re down there. And how you treat people is going to become your karma. This is why the Buddha recommends, as part of a daily practice, not only seclusion but also right view. This requires that you listen to the Dhamma regularly. You learn some of the chants so they become part of your inner concert. The mind’s song, as the Janma would say. We have so many strange songs that go running through our heads. If you memorize some of the chants, you get some better ones. A lot of these songs hang around because they fit in with the rhythm of your breathing, the rhythm of your walking, the rhythm of your heart. So you want to find some chants that fit in with the rhythm of your heart. Memorize those and listen to the Dhamma regularly to straighten out your views. That really helps put things into perspective. So the Buddha recommends our virtue, in other words, holding to the precepts, restraint of the senses, and restraint over your conversation. In all these cases, you’re watching over your mind. You’re watching over your behavior. And it’s good to have that sense that you’re being observed all the time. And you want to train your inner observer to be good. All too often we hear mindfulness practices described as putting aside your inner critic and just accepting everything. But look what the Buddha said concerning the qualities of mindfulness. Alertness, mindfulness itself, the ability to keep something in mind. You don’t just keep it in mind as a decoration of the mind. It’s supposed to inform your actions. You look at what you’re doing. How does it fit in with what the Buddha had taught you? What does the Buddha have to say about what kind of actions are appropriate? What kind of conversation is appropriate? When you’re looking at things, listening to things, who should be doing the looking and listening? Your greed, your aversion, your delusion, your irritation, or your wisdom? So you want to keep in mind what the Buddha had to say about these things. And then you want to be alert, watching what you’re actually doing. So you can check to make sure that it is in line with the Buddha’s teachings. And this may seem like a lot. But here again, this is why we have seclusion to fall back on. If you can’t take long periods of meditation, take little meditation breaks as you go through the day. Have some time just to step away. Let the mind rest. And in the course of resting, you come out and you’re coming from a different perspective. You’re not so totally immersed in the world. You’re up in that tower and you’re not an anteater. You’re a human being looking at human beings. And that’s why you keep your priorities straight. That’s a lot of what applying the Dhamma to your life is all about, is having a sense of priorities. The Buddha doesn’t say that you shouldn’t have any desires or any comforts in life. He said that as long as the comforts in life don’t have a bad effect on your mind, go ahead, enjoy them. In fact, he said that the ability to enjoy the pleasures of life, as long as they’re in line with the Dhamma, is an important ability. Because if you can’t enjoy them, it’s hard to have goodwill for others. It’s hard to have empathetic joy for others. You’re jealous of their pleasures. As long as your pleasures are in line with the Dhamma, fine. But have a strong sense of what is in line with the Dhamma. And hold yourself to a high standard. Someone informed me recently of a Dhamma talk by someone else called “Lower Your Standards.” I didn’t even want to listen to the talk. The title was enough to show that it was wrong. You have to raise your standards. You’re training that inner critic. To be helpful. Ideally, you’d like to have as your inner voice, the voice of one of the noble ones. Your mindfulness, your alertness. Try to make them noble. It’s a word we don’t hear much of. Like that time I gave a Dhamma talk way back, during my first couple years here in California. In the talk, I happened to mention the word “dignity.” After the talk, a woman in the group came up. She was a Russian immigrant. She told me that she had been in America for about ten years. She had learned the word “dignity” in English class back in Russia. She had never heard it used here. That tells you a lot. We want to think of living a life in a way that is noble, that has dignity. That is honorable. So it’s good to have seclusion and to develop right view, to keep things in perspective. Now we can look back at our lives and have a strong sense that we kept our priorities straight. If you have that sense, it’s a good thing to take with you. Because there are so many other things in the world that they use to force their priorities on you. But then the rewards are not anything that you can hold on to. They slip through your fingers. You want rewards that sustain you, that don’t let you down.

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