Success

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One of the things that struck me very early on during my time in Thailand—this was even before I ever thought of becoming a monk—was that there were two parallel societies. There was the worldly society and the monastic society. And it was having that second society that kept the society at large. People could come with their troubles in the world and have a place where they could step out. Another society where the values were very different. What counted as success in the world did not necessarily count as success in the Dhamma. And having the Dhamma gave you some perspective. That’s what was really important in life. Because if you have nothing but worldly society, as seems to be the situation here in America, everything is all about your work, your fame, material gain. Or, as the Buddha said, in terms of the qualities of the world, material gain, status, praise, pleasure. But these things have their opposites as well. And you can’t have the good side without the bad side. There’s going to be a material loss. There’s going to be a loss of status or lack of status, criticism, pain. We try to grab onto the good side, and then we find it slipping away from our fingers, slipping out of our grasp. And that’s when it’s good to have the Dhamma there to remind you that even the good side of the world is not all that good. As a Chan-li once said, “What’s good in the world is not true. What’s true in the world is not good.” In other words, the good things don’t last. And the truth of the world is that everything sloughs away. Success sometimes comes to people who don’t seem to deserve it. And it’s good to remind yourself that that kind of success is really worth nothing. As you look at your life, things don’t seem to be going well. One, it’s good to be able to step out and remind yourself what it means to go well. And two, it’s good to remind yourself that when things go down, they can also go up. It’s not that material success is all bad. After all, the Buddha said one of the ways of finding happiness in life is having initiative in your work, trying to be clever in what you do. In other words, use your ingenuity and be untiring in your work. Keep at it, keep at it. But the real value of all that is the qualities of your intention. Your intelligence and your persistence. Because those are actual treasures that you take with you. The status you gain in this lifetime doesn’t go with you after you die. The material gain doesn’t go. But the qualities of the mind do go. So you want to work on those and measure your success in life in terms of the good qualities you’ve been able to develop. They’re the basis for success in terms of success in meditation, but they can also be applied to success in life outside. Desire, really wanting to do the work, and then actually being persistent, energetic in doing the work, being very attentive to what you’re doing, and then using your ingenuity to reflect on what you’re doing as you’re doing it. This falls in line with another principle that the Buddha said is the source for all Dhamma. And Dhamma here means Dhamma in the capital D sense of the Dhamma. But also any good quality. You commit yourself to a good path of action, and then you reflect on what you’re doing. You step back. If things are not working, why? If things are working, how can you make them better? The speed with which these qualities will lead to success outside is dependent on a lot of other things as well. There’s the issue of past karma. But as long as you’re developing these qualities, you’re on the right track. And remind yourself, the right track is a very long-term track. When the Buddha is talking about long-term happiness, he’s really talking about really, really long, the success of the world. The things you can gain, the status you can gain, the results of your work. Long term, in this lifetime, means lasting as long as you’re alive. For the Buddha, long term means a lot longer than that. So try to take that longer perspective and reflect on people in the past. Not everybody was a Mozart or a Schumann or Schubert who succeeded very quickly. Think about Kant, the German philosopher. Up until his late 40s, he was pretty much of a dilettante. He was a minor philosopher, not anybody special. He hadn’t done anything any special. And all of a sudden he had his insight. It was through reading a book and going back and looking at a book he’d read many times before, and suddenly realizing that there was something there, a potential there, that he could develop. But here he was in his late 40s, and he realized that the work he had to do was going to require a lot of discipline. So he was someone who was not all that disciplined up to that point. Suddenly he had his insight, and he sat down and he changed his life. He became so disciplined that, as I said, you could set your clock by when he went out for his morning walk. And even though his teachings were not all that well understood when they were first published, still we think of him as being a very successful philosopher. He had a huge impact on European thought, writing books from his late 40s to his late 60s. So sometimes worldly success comes in the form of a tenderness after a while. It’s not that success starts with a tender age and then just is inevitable from then on. So how quickly or slowly outside success is going to come? Remember, you’ve got the Dhamma to give you a long-term perspective. And within that perspective, a couple of decades is a small thing. And outside success, ultimately, is not the real issue. The issue is, what are you doing with your mind? Because your mind is what you take with you as you go. It’s the qualities of the mind. So you want them to be good qualities. It’s like packing your luggage. Every time you pack your luggage, you do something. Every time you make a decision, you’re packing something into your luggage. So you want to make sure you’re packing good things. You don’t want to get to the point where you open your luggage and discover there’s nothing but yesterday’s trash. Remember, a successful life is one that’s lived in a good way all the way through, developing good qualities of the mind all the way through. So even though monastic culture is still a very tender culture here in the West, try to tap into it. You’re with people who have different values from the people outside. Values that actually are healthy for the state of your mind. They don’t say success is a bad thing. They just give you a better perspective on it. What really counts is long-term success and the healthy way to go about looking for success, both in the Dhamma and in the world.

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