Priorities in Life

January 28, 2022

One time King Vassanidhi came to see the Buddha in the middle of the day. You may know the story. The Buddha asked him, “Where are you coming from? What have you been doing?” And the king very frankly says, “All the sorts of things that someone who’s been made a king would do, someone who’s obsessed with gaining power and maintaining power, and who’s obsessed with gaining power and maintaining power.” And the Buddha asked him, “Suppose someone were to come from the east, someone you trust, and were to say to you, ‘There’s a huge mountain moving in from the east, crushing all living beings in its path.’ Someone else you trust came from the south, but knew that there was a mountain moving in from the south, and the same way from the west and the north, altogether four mountains moving in, crushing all living beings in their path. Given this horrible destruction of human life, and how precious it is to gain a human breath, what would you do?” And the king says, “What else can I do but right conduct, dharma conduct?” And the Buddha says, “Well, I tell you, aging, illness, and death are rolling in, crushing all living beings in their path. What are you going to do?” And the king says, “Well, right conduct, dharma conduct.” The king goes on to say that he realizes that when aging and death are moving in like that, no matter how strong an army you have, it’s not going to be able to fight them off. So you can see the king can’t pick up a message from the Buddha. The problem is we don’t know how far he was able to practice it. The story ends there. We have other stories about the king. One day he wants to go see the Buddha, and he takes along his son. He asks the Buddha a few questions, one of which has to do with some report he heard of what the Buddha said in the palace. And the Buddha said it’s not true. So the king tries to find out who brought the report, and he can never get to the bottom of the issue. His son blames somebody else. Somebody else blames the son. Then the king goes on to ask the Buddha several questions. You can tell by the way he asks the questions. They’re kind of muddled in his head. The Buddha helps him to straighten out the questions and answers them. The king says, “Hmm, that’s reasonable.” Then he goes on to something else, and something else, scattered all over the place. The son starts asking questions when the Buddha talks about devas. He wants to know if there are some devas who can overthrow other devas. When the Buddha talks about brahmanas, are there brahmanas who can overthrow other brahmanas? You can see what’s on his mind. So here’s the king. He’s got all that power. And he’s got a son who’s thinking of overthrowing him. He’s got people in the palace that he can’t trust. He has no idea who’s telling the truth and who’s not. And he can’t stay focused on an issue long enough to form an inner proper question or to really take the answer and do something with it. All he says is, “Well, that makes sense. That sounds reasonable.” And then he moves on. So it’s a picture of the drawbacks of being in a position of power. You have to think about this as you’re going through life, choosing a career. What kind of life do you want to look back on when it ends? What kind of opportunities do you not want to miss? What opportunities can you figure out? “Well, it’s okay if I miss those.” You want to make sure you live a life where you can practice the Dhamma and you can get a sense of it more than just that it makes sense. You really can see that it makes a difference in your life. Sometimes it just becomes something winsome. It sounds nice, but it doesn’t really go that deep. You have to create a life where you can let these things go deep. I received a message from someone yesterday about their sightseeing in Thailand right now. And she was saying that as she goes around sightseeing, she begins to realize that other sensual desires are beginning to flare up in her mind. She wanted to know what the problem was. I said it was a lack of restrained senses. When you go sightseeing, you don’t just look for the things that are pretty. You try to go look for the Dhamma lessons. One time, when I first got here at Wat Mettai, there was a group of laypeople who came from Thailand. They wanted to take a Jan Suat on a trip to Yellowstone. So I stayed here and held down the fort here at the monastery. He and a couple of other monks went along with the laypeople. When I came back, I asked him what he’d seen in Yellowstone. He said, “Inconstancy.” In other words, he looked for the Dhamma. Years later, when he went back to Thailand, people asked him what he’d seen in America. He said, “Inconstancy.” He knew how to look and I knew how to listen. And you want to live your life in such a way that allows you to look and listen in that way. There’s a story of a Jon Mon out in the forest. There was a monk from the city who was taken to see a Jon Mon, not because he wanted to, but because his teacher had told him to go. He asked the Jon Mon, “Here in Bangkok, I run across problems in my meditation, problems in my practice. Even though I’m surrounded by wise people, people who are very knowledgeable, still there are a lot of times I run across a problem that nobody can answer. What about you out here in the forest all alone? Who can you go to for an answer? How can you hear the Dhamma?” Jon Mon said, “I hear the Dhamma 24/7, all day, every day, except when I’m asleep.” The city monk was appropriately taken aback and chastised. He said, “Well, that shows that you really know how to listen.” So there are Dhamma lessons all around. But it’s a question of learning how to tune in to the Dhamma channel. And part of that has to do with your occupation. And part of it has to do with your general attitude. Jon Fung had some students in Bangkok who were successful in their careers but were also really good meditators. And the attitude they had was that any spare time they had was devoted to the practice. He had other students who had lots of time but didn’t get very far in their meditation because they didn’t have that same sense of urgency. The best cases were those who had extra time and had the sense of urgency. And where does the urgency come from? It comes from sanghvega, realizing that we’re stuck in this cycle and we go around and around and around. But we don’t have to be stuck. That’s the vissana part. Sanghvega basically sees, “If I don’t make any changes, this is what it’s going to be. It’s going to keep coming back, just the same old thing.” Then there’s the vissana of confidence, when you realize, “Okay, there’s a way out.” You keep the two together. The confidence that there is a way out is what gets you to practice, and the sense that if you don’t practice, there’s going to be trouble. That’s what gives a sense of urgency to it. So as you’re practicing, you want to make sure you look at your life. Is this the kind of life that’s going to be good for the practice? If it’s not, what can you change? Because you don’t want to simply squeeze the practice into whatever little cracks there are in your life. Otherwise, it becomes like those little plants that you see growing out of the sidewalk in New York. They’re squeezed into the narrow confines of the crack on the sidewalk. They come out looking kind of twisted. You want the practice to have priority. Because, after all, the way we live life normally in this society, their main interest is that you become a productive member of society and you learn how to get along. But then you die. And they don’t say anything about what’s going to happen to you after you die. They’re not concerned about that. That’s where you’re on your own. So seeing that nobody else is going to do anything for you in that area, you’ve got to do something for yourself. You’ve got to devote your time and your energy to seeing what the Buddha said was true. There really is a deathless, something that you can touch with the mind. And you can bring the mind to that threshold through your own efforts. That’s the big issue of life. After all, that’s the issue that inspired the young Bodhisatta to go out into the wilderness to begin with. It’s because he wanted to find that deathless that we have the Dhamma. It’s a pretty audacious desire on his part. There’s no guarantee there was any such thing. There was not even a word of any such thing. The concept was there, but nobody had found the answer, whether it was true or not. We at least have the reports of some people who say that it really is true, and they seem to be reliable. But we can’t prove it until we prove it for ourselves. So that issue should take top priority, and the rest of your life should be ordered around it. That’s how you can guarantee that you live a life well. And that when you leave this life, you leave it without any sense of regret. So we take the story of King Pasenadi as a cautionary tale. Here he had access to the Buddha. He could discuss the Dhamma with him. But we have no idea about how far he was able to get. So we should take that as a warning. It is possible to learn about the Dhamma but not to benefit fully from it. But it’s also possible to benefit from it, and to whatever extent you can make the choices about your life. Try to make them in such a way that you open up the opportunity to benefit as much as you can from what the Dhamma has to teach. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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