

## *The Ten Priorities*

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If we measure our lives in terms of our outside achievements or the impact we have on the world, it can often be pretty depressing. You can look back at your life, and even in the space of a lifetime you can see that a lot of the things you accomplished when you were a lot younger have been wiped out in one way or another. The things that haven't been wiped out could easily be wiped out down the line.

Of course, there comes a point when the whole world is going to get burned to a crisp—if there's anything left at all when the sun goes nova. When you think in those terms, it all seems pretty pointless. Fortunately, the Buddha doesn't have us think in those terms. The real accomplishments of life are the things that you develop in the mind, the qualities you develop. Those you take with you even after you die, and they won't get burned up, even when this universe ends.

So even though, say, a gift that you've given is now used up, or something you've built has now fallen down, the qualities of mind that went into giving the gift or building that thing stay on as important habits in the mind.

This perspective can be especially helpful for lay people. When you look at how Dhamma practice fits in your life, or what can be accomplished by Dhamma practice, it's good to look in terms of these qualities of mind. That way, even as you work at your job, live with your family, and deal with all the issues of lay life, there's a way of connecting them to the practice. It's not that you're just trying to be mindful as you go through the day. You're actually developing a wide range of good qualities, qualities that will stand you in good stead and will stay with you even though the impact of those qualities in the outside world can be washed away.

One of these lists of qualities is the *paramis*. You don't find them in the suttas, but they're late in the Canon. Apparently, they were developed after the Jataka tales were added to the Canon. People tried to look around the Jataka tales to see what they could tell us about the path that the Buddha followed on his way to awakening. What qualities was he developing? They came up with a list of ten. Then as they looked at the list, they realized that these qualities were not really that special for the Buddha; they were qualities that we all have to develop as we practice and as we work our way along the path.

A convenient way of thinking about these ten paramis is to place them under the Buddha's own list of the four determinations: discernment, truth,

relinquishment, and cam.

The Pali term, *parami*, is one of those words that we don't really know how best to translate. Often it's translated as "perfection." In Thailand, when they talk about people having *parami*, it's like a fund of good qualities they've inherited from their past actions. One way of interpreting the word *parami* relates it to *parama*, which means "foremost." In other words, these should be your foremost priorities as you go through life, realizing that whatever else gets accomplished in life, you do want to emphasize developing these qualities in your mind.

Under the determination of discernment, you have the paramis of discernment and goodwill. Goodwill is an essential part of the Buddha's take of discernment. We can use our discernment for all kinds of things, but it's the wise person who realizes that discernment is best used in trying to figure out why we're suffering and how we can give rise to true happiness, a happiness that harms no one. This is why goodwill has to be universal, limitless, because we want a happiness that's totally harmless, that doesn't harm anybody, anywhere at all. That becomes the motivating force for our discernment.

As an element in determination, discernment is essential for two things: one, figuring out what kind of goals really are worth pursuing; and two, figuring out how best to go about it. Once you've set your sights on finding true happiness, the next question is, "How do you attain it?" When the Buddha sets out the path in terms of the noble eightfold path, an important part of right view is realizing that there are these qualities you have to develop in the mind: virtue, concentration, and discernment. This is the path we have to follow.

It's not a path just for some people. It's for everyone, across the board. As the Buddha said, in any teaching where you find the noble eightfold path, that's where you'll find awakened people. In any teaching where no noble eightfold path is taught, there are no awakened people. It's that simple.

So that's what discernment teaches you. These are the things you want to keep in mind.

The determination of truthfulness includes the perfections of truth, virtue, persistence, and endurance. There are a lot of difficult tasks in the path. You really have to stick with it. It's not something you do for a weekend: spending Saturday learning about your awakened nature, then Sunday thinking about integrating your awakened nature with the rest of your life, and then going back to work on Monday. That's not what the path is all about. It requires a long-term commitment. Which means you have to be true to it.

Also, it means that you have to sort out all the other desires that you might have that would lead in different directions. "To what extent do I really want to

find true happiness, and to what extent will I let myself be satisfied with something lesser?" This is a question we can answer only for ourselves. Some people are more ready to commit fully than other people are. As the Buddha said, you have to adjust your persistence, which means also your energy and the effort that you put into the path, to your level of strength: what you can do, what you can manage. Take into account the other commitments you have. The Buddha doesn't tell you just to throw everything away.

I've seen many cases in Thailand of people suddenly saying, "I'm sick of this. I'm leaving home and going off to the monastery." They rarely do very well because they lack a sense of commitment, the ability to stick with something when it's difficult, and to learn how to make it less difficult.

John McPhee tells the story about going out into the wilds of Alaska one time, visiting a man who was well known as a subsistence farmer. He, the farmer, and the farmer's wife were going to walk from the farmer's home back to the river. It was going to be a two-day jaunt, so they were going to have to camp out along the way.

John McPhee had brought along a little inflatable pillow. He felt very embarrassed about it. He mentioned his embarrassment to the wife. She said, "Look. We're not here to rough it. We're here to smooth it. We're not being rough just for the sake of roughness. If there are areas where we can make it smooth, okay, we make it smooth." You do what you can to make things easy, to give yourself strength.

This is why we have the practice of concentration. It's our nourishment. It's our food on the path, giving us a sense of ease and well-being. It's a matter of finding a place where the mind can be centered and feel at home so that instead of dwelling on the difficulties of the path, we find our inner strengths. Then the difficulties don't seem so difficult after all. They're bearable. The tasks we encounter along the path are doable because we don't waste our energy in useless ways. We learn how to gather our energy and feed off it as we develop the mind.

Then there are the perfections that go under the heading of relinquishment. These include generosity and renunciation. Generosity is a quality of mind. It's not just the things that you give, it's the attitude with which you give them, such as the attitude that sees that somebody else needs something or could use something and you have it. You don't need it quite so much, or you can do without it, so you're happy to share. Someone else is doing something good and you feel you could help. Or someone is going off the path, and you have the ability to get them back on through your advice, your counsel, or your support. All these things count as generosity.

They, too, strengthen the mind. You find that your mind becomes more wide open. It's a more spacious mind to live in. It's not totally concerned just with its own issues. You look around and you sense the needs of others. You have the ability to help. This is an important part of the path. It's an important quality to develop in the mind. Other people respect you; you have more respect for yourself.

As for renunciation, this deals specifically with learning how to renounce sensual pleasures as we look for happiness inside the mind. Most of us would like to have the sensual pleasures *and* the happiness inside the mind. But there are many areas where it's not a matter of both/and, it's either/or.

Don't let yourself get carried away by sensual pleasures. Otherwise, you don't have the time to practice, as you're concerned about maintaining those pleasures and producing the energy that goes into finding them and keeping them. The attitude that gets developed this way is very possessive of these things. As the Buddha said, one of the reasons we fear death is because of our attachment to sensual pleasures and to our sensual desires. So, it's an important thing to learn how to give up. Realize that there are better forms of happiness. The dangers of being attached to sensuality are much greater than the dangers of being attached to, say, jhana.

Often, you find that the mind is not willing to really settle down and look for happiness inside unless it's cornered in a place where things are not quite so comfortable or where things are not quite so easy. Where are you going to look for your sustenance then? Where are you going to look for your strength? When people are used to depending on things outside, it's actually a weakness. "This has to be that way. That has to be this way." The mind just gets weaker and weaker because it doesn't really have to exercise itself. But if you realize that the only opportunity you have for true happiness is looking inside and developing good qualities inside, then you start exercising those qualities. This is where relinquishment is a crucial part of the path.

Finally, there's calm. This is another area where you could bring in patience, but primarily equanimity. Equanimity is what keeps us going on the path. In other words, we see that it's a long path, and it would be very easy to get worked up about that fact, to get frustrated. Especially on days that the meditation's not going so well, equanimity helps us to keep the long view in mind. The mind is complex. Our karmic history is complex. Our ability at any one moment to see progress on the path depends not only on our present efforts but also on influences coming in from the past, about which we can do very little.

So, you accept that fact. Then, you work with it. Acceptance or equanimity

don't mean that you just sit there and say, "Well, everything's just fine as it is, I don't have to do anything. All I have to do is learn how to accept and that'll take care of the problem." That's not what the Buddha meant. Equanimity is an understanding of the principle of karma: If you waste your energy on actions that won't bear fruit, you won't have the energy you need to develop the areas where you *can* make a difference.

So these are the qualities that we want to work on. As you look at your life, even though you may not have all the time in the world to practice meditation, you can contemplate your various activities as you go through the day. Which good qualities are they developing? Or are they working against the good qualities you want in the mind? This is how you can start sorting out your life, realizing that it is possible to make a living, live in a family, and develop good qualities of mind at the same time. That's what makes your life part of the practice. It's not simply being mindful as you go through the day. You're trying to develop strengths of mind.

You want to give priority to these qualities because they're the things that will repay you most and stick with you for the longest.

So it's good to think every now and then, "Where is your life going?" And you realize that where it's going is based on your decisions. It's not that there's somebody else out there who has a plan for you, and you somehow have to divine the plan, figure out what it is. You have the choice of how you're going to give meaning and purpose to your life. As the Buddha would say, it's the fool who doesn't see the necessity of developing the mind. It's the wise person who sees that necessity and gives it top priority.

The teachings of the perfections are a good way of keeping yourself on that track, of reminding yourself what has to be developed if you really want to find true happiness.