

Perfections as Priorities

August 21, 2008

We sit here focused on the breath, mindful of the breath, alert. We want to make sure we're not just mindful and alert for a few breaths and then off someplace else. We want to *stay* mindful and alert for the whole hour. And then at the end of the hour when you get up, you want to maintain that mindfulness and alertness as long as you're awake.

That requires ardency, the willingness to give energy to the practice with the confidence that if you do it in the proper way, in a skillful way—and that's what ardency is all about, it's not just plain old effort, it's skillful effort—if your effort is skillful, then you gain energy in return. But you first have to be willing to make the investment. That often means going through periods when the effort is not yet skillful, and wondering if it's ever going to get right.

This is where your determination sees you through. In fact, all of the qualities that are called *paramis* or perfections come into play here. The practice is not simply a matter of technique. It requires developing your heart as well as your mind. We think of the heart and mind as two separate things, but in almost all the languages where Buddhism has been practiced, the words for *heart* and *mind* tend to blur into each other. *Citta* in Pali is used in some cases where it means mind, and in some where it means heart.

So you're not just training your mind here, you're training your heart as well. Which means that meditation is not just a matter of techniques, but also a matter of strengthening the inner qualities that allow you to give yourself to the practice in a whole-hearted way, in the hopes that the whole heart and whole mind will benefit.

This is what the teachings about the perfections are all about: They focus on the qualities of the heart and mind that you need to bring to the practice and are going to get developed in the practice. They're an excellent framework for looking at the practice as a lifetime process, not simply what you do when you're on retreat. They're a way of enabling you to answer the question, "What are you going to do with your life? What do you want out of your life?"

When you look back in your life as death is approaching, what do you want to look back on? And what do you want to take with you as a result of having lived this life? If you focus your attention simply on pleasures, you won't have anything at that point—just memories of the pleasures, which may or may not be pleasant memories. Or you may decide that you want to leave your mark, to accomplish something in the world, but that's a pretty risky proposition because the world has its pendulum swings. The efforts you make might come just at the end of a pendulum swing that's going to turn around and wipe out everything you've done.

I once listened to a lawyer who had worked his way up through the government echelons. He'd argued a lot of civil rights cases back in the era when the Supreme Court was liberal. But then he lived long enough to see the pendulum swing back and get conservative again. He lived to see many of the things he had worked for dismantled.

I once went with my father to visit our old home in Charlottesville. It was a house we'd built ourselves. We had worked with the architect, got the design we wanted. And even though we hired some builders, Dad did a lot of the carpentry work; we as a family did the painting—all the things we could do to help save money in building the house. So one day some 30 years after we had moved away, I went with my father and older brother to visit Charlottesville. As we swung by the house, we saw that the current owners weren't taking proper care of it. The roof was beginning to rot through in some spots.

We drove back, dropped my brother off, and then it was just my Dad and me. As he was driving, he said, "You know, I have nothing to show for my life." And he went through all the times he had been a farmer, spent all that time and energy growing his potatoes, and then was paid money by the government to destroy the crops to help keep up the price of potatoes. He'd gotten a job in the government, and worked hard to make proposals that Congress then pork-barreled beyond recognition. And then finally a president came in and wiped out the council he was working on. Thinking about what he said made me realize that if you look for your accomplishments in the world outside, they can easily get erased.

So if we're not here just for our own personal pleasures or to leave a mark in the world, what are we here for? Well, the teaching on the perfections points you to the mind. You want to be here to develop qualities of the mind. You may not want to be here, but here you are, so what are you going to do about it? What are you going to get out of this? There's a lot of suffering involved in being a human being—and this is one of the better planes of existence—so what will you have to show for your life? If you've worked on qualities of the mind, they carry over. They're an accomplishment that's entirely within your power.

That's what we're working on here. It's good to keep that perspective in mind. The qualities may not grow as quickly as we'd like, but that's what the quality of patience is for: to learn how to stick with something even through frustration, even through difficulty. In the course of that, you may find yourself getting distracted with ideas of what else might be more pleasant: That's what the qualities of determination and truthfulness are for. In fact, determination seems to underlie all the perfections. There are four aspects to determination. You use your *discernment* to decide what you want to accomplish, to see how it best might be accomplished, and then you stick with it. To stick with it requires *truthfulness*, which doesn't mean just telling the truth; it means that once you've made up your mind, you really stick with what you've decided to do. You're true to yourself. You're not a traitor to yourself. That's what'll see you through.

This is going to involve some *renunciation* and require that you develop a sense of *calm* within the renunciation, because there are many possible pleasures in this life. If you try to gather up all of them, you go crazy. Once a year I head up to the Bay Area, where there are still traces of the human potential movement. There's a strong sense up there that you can and should actualize your full potential as a human being by striving for excellence in all areas of your life: becoming physically strong and healthy, mentally sharp, artistically creative, socially enlightened, sexually active, politically active, spiritually advanced. People rarely stop to consider that excellence in one area might actually cancel out or preclude excellence in another. In the back of their minds, there's always the thought, "Well, if I'm not happy, it's because I'm not trying hard enough in

every possible direction.” That’s crazy-making. You’ve got to focus on what’s really worthwhile in life, which means resisting a lot of the currents in our culture, because our culture seems to be all about distraction in all directions—or as someone once put it, “discursive noise.”

You’re the one who has to focus your mind to keep it calmly centered and on-course in the midst of all this. You’re the one who has to decide on your goals and to realize that you’ll have to give up some of the things you like in order to attain those goals. I’ve told you the story about the Chinese woman teaching her stepdaughter, while they were playing chess, that if you want to be happy in life you have to decide that there’s one thing you want more than anything else, and you have to be willing to sacrifice everything else for that one thing. That, of course, was a lesson the stepdaughter didn’t want to hear. What she did notice though, was that her stepmother was losing chess pieces all over the board. So she decided, “Well, here’s my chance to beat my stepmother in chess.” She started playing more aggressively, but it turned out to be a trap. The stepmother had been sacrificing her pieces strategically to lure the girl in, and then she checkmated her.

Of course, the way the stepmother played chess was an illustration of the principle she was trying to teach. If you’re willing to sacrifice some pawns and knights and other pieces here and there, you can win. That’s how we should live our lives, realizing we can’t keep all our pawns and win at the same time. We have to make our choices. There are a lot of either/ors in life. We prefer the both/and—and sometimes not just the both/and. We want the both/and/and/and/and/and....

But if you really want to have something to show for your life, you’ve got to recognize where it’s strictly either/or. You’ve got to decide that there are important qualities in the mind that have to take top priority over everything else.

Priority. That’s one of the possible meanings of the word *parami*, which is usually translated as “perfection.” *Parami* is one of those words that nobody really knows why it was chosen or what it means. It doesn’t appear in any of the Buddha’s own teachings, but was a later development in the tradition. One of the possible meanings of *parami* is related to *parama*, which means to be foremost. And the idea of “foremost” can be understood in two ways: One is that you try to become really excellent and foremost in these particular qualities of the mind; and, two, you want to give them top priority, make them foremost in your life. When you’re working on a job, whether or not the job succeeds, you want to be sure to develop qualities like patience, truthfulness, determination, and discernment regardless. Sometimes the success of the job may depend on factors totally beyond your control. But patience is something you can develop, determination is something you can develop regardless of outside circumstances.

So remember as you meditate, it’s not just a matter of following a technique. You have to apply yourself fully. You have to give your whole heart to this. And as you give your whole heart, your heart gains wholeness. When you give questions of the wise heart top priority, the heart does become excellent.

It’s good to look at your life and ask yourself, “What do I want to accomplish with this life?” You don’t know how many years you have left, but you do know you have right now. And then the next right now, and the next. So as long as the

right nows are coming, use them as an opportunity to develop these qualities of the heart, because these are the things that make human life worthwhile.