

## *Top Priorities*

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There's a passage in the Canon where a deva comes down to a monk and advises that he should devote himself to sensual pleasures. As she says, "Don't devote yourself to a far-off goal and miss the immediate happiness it can be had." And he says, "I'm not devoting myself to a far-off goal. I'm devoting myself to the happiness can be found in the immediate present." The deva exemplifies an attitude we find too often among people who meditate, where they think of the results of the meditation as something far off, whereas the concerns of day-to-day life are more pressing, more immediate, that we have to attend to them first. The meditation is for when you have spare time.

But that's got everything backwards, as the monk shows. The meditation is concerned very much with the good of the present moment. And the good of the present moment doesn't happen on its own. That old phrase, "present moment, wonderful moment," is a lie, in the sense that the present is not automatically wonderful. You have to *make* it good. It's your immediate input right now that's going to make the present moment good or bad. So what input are you putting in, based on what resources? This is what the meditation is for: to develop those resources. So you have to attend to your resources first: your concentration, your mindfulness, your basic level of energy.

These things have to have first priority. If they get pushed back, then how are you going to deal properly with all the affairs of the world, all the affairs of daily life? What strength do you have to offer? You may feel that you owe it to the people around you to attend to their concerns first, but they can see when you're beginning to get frazzled, when you're beginning to get worn out. The quality of your work suffers. The amount of help you can give them suffers as well. So this is one of those rare areas where looking after your own well-being is also, at the same time, looking at the well-being of other people. The more energy you develop inside, the more solid your mind, then the more you have to offer.

So keep that in mind. It's the training of the mind that has to take first priority, because everything good comes out of that. At the same time, when it has first priority in that way, it can develop a momentum because it becomes more and more continuous. The training of the mind becomes 24/7. There's a continuity, a momentum that builds up, which you can't have when everything is chopped up and squeezed into this corner here or that crack in your daily life over there.

So when we're sitting here with our eyes closed, that's simply one note on this long line of practice, developing habits that you should then take with you as you get up from the cushion, get up from the floor, and go through the rest of your life. When you find the mind wandering off now, what do you do? And how is it different from what you do outside? If there's a difference, you've got a problem. We're working on habits that you need to use day to day to day, moment to moment.

Meditation practice teaches that if you want to make something out of your life, you have to be clear about what you're doing, clear about what your intention is. Then if you notice something in the mind wandering away from that intention, you don't go there. You realize that it's a waste of time, a waste of energy, and it's blocking the things you really want out of life.

So keeping track of the wandering mind is not something you do only while you're sitting here. It's something you want to do throughout the day. You're dealing with the hindrances. It's not something you have to work at only when you've got your eyes closed, or that you only have time to do while you have your eyes closed. You have to watch out for the hindrances all the time, and learn to counteract them all the time. Give the mind a home base. Make it a comfortable place to stay, all the time. Keep tending to that, watch after that.

When something goes wrong with the breath, be sensitive to it. Again, try to keep your sensitivity of the breath going all the time. It may seem like a lot to ask when you've got to focus on your work and on the sense of the breath in your body at the same time. But then again the breath is what provides the energy you need to do the work. You've got to look after your resources. And it's possible. You develop a different sense of what's important but you also can develop a different range of skills.

You look at what's going on in your mind in the course of day and you can see that the mind is like a huge control room with lots information coming in from all sorts of directions. You've got a monitor who's trying to decide which information is worth looking into and which information is best blocked out. We have certain habitual ways of worrying about what this person is thinking, or that person is thinking: "What they're going to do to me if this doesn't happen." A lot of that is just pure garbage. When you learn to drop the garbage, then you have more mental space for the information that's coming in from the breath, that says, "Hey, something's wrong here. Something needs to be looked after."

So it's not just a matter technique, it's also a matter of getting your priorities right as to what information really is worthwhile in changing your habits. As long as you waste your energy on dead-end information, the meditation is going to get

bogged down. The energy level in your mind is going to get bogged down. Then you can't really handle anything properly. The range of information you can handle gets smaller and smaller because your energy grows less and less.

So at the very least you've got to look at the meditation as a way of maintaining your energy level: the energy of the breath, the energy in the mind when it feels well rested. It's important that this has first priority.

When you get skilled at this, it's not just one more obligation placed on an already heavily obligated day. It's a principle for clearing out, for sorting out what information is useful, what information can be put aside, what tasks are really important, and which ones are less important.

So the skills you develop as you meditate have to take first priority all the time. And you have to remember them all the time. Don't just leave them here in the monastery or in the meditation hall, sticking them under the table, pulling them out when time comes to meditate again, like a cushion or a bench. That's not the proper attitude at all. You want to soak them in, soak them in, so that wherever you go, you're saturated with them and can carry them with you. That way they can show their real and immediate benefits, and help the benefits to build over time.