

Top Priorities

September 5, 2010

There's an old Russian saying that a fox knows many things, while a hedgehog knows only one thing, but it knows it really well. As meditators, we have to learn how to be like hedgehogs. There are lots of things we know in the world. Our eyes pick up all kinds of forms, our ear hears all kinds of sounds, all the way down through the senses. We pick up an awful lot of information in the course of the day, but we have to have a really clear sense of what's really important and what's not, what to focus on and what to let go.

And the simple fact that the path centers on right concentration should give us an important message. There are a very limited number of things that we really have to focus on, that we really can benefit from developing, and there are a lot of things we have to let go. If you try to straighten out everything in life, the job never gets done. It's like that game of whack-a-mole. You hit one mole as it comes out of the hole, well, another mole comes out another hole, then another one out of another hole, and there's no end to them.

The ajans talk about this quite a lot. They say there's only one job in the world where you can really come to the end of, and that's the job of straightening out your own mind, gaining victory over your own mind. A lot of the straightening out we like to do is basically trying to gain victory over other people, over other situations, exerting our will, exerting our control, and yet how long can that control last? A lot of times in exerting our control we accumulate a lot of bad karma, which comes back to bite us later on.

There's that case of Laai, the cat we had years back here at the monastery. For many years she ruled the roost over the other cats there in the guesthouse. Then as she got old and weak, the cats she had been lording it over turned on her. She had a miserable old age.

Thinking about karma makes you realize that that kind of victory doesn't really accomplish anything. It actually causes you a lot of trouble because it can turn around and turn into defeat. But the victory over your defilements, once you've really won it, doesn't harm anybody. Nobody's going to mind the fact that you have less greed, less aversion, less delusion. And it's a job that really can come to an end.

This is one of the reasons, I think, they talked about the paramis of the Buddha. There are lots of disagreement on what the word *parami* comes from, but one of the possibilities is that

the Buddha focused on what's of foremost—*param*—importance in life, i.e., developing qualities of the mind. When you make that your goal, then you can let the other issues of life go by.

Now, this doesn't mean that you don't do things with other people or help with things outside, but you realize that you can exert only so much control over such things. The important point is that you develop good qualities of the mind while you're trying to help outside. So even if it turns out that the help simply can't help the other person, because of karma or because of changes in society—there's a lot that we really can't control—still, what you *can* control is the attitude you bring to whatever task you're doing, and you give that top priority.

Right now, we're working on concentration, so make it your top priority. As for anything else that comes up in the mind right now, just let it go. Whatever stories come up about what this person or that person did, or what you're going to have to do tomorrow or what you did yesterday or today: Those can go by the wayside. They don't have the importance of learning how to train the mind to be clear, focused, solid, here in the present moment.

You have to keep this strong sense of priorities in line if you want to develop the paramis, if you want to develop the perfections, because otherwise they turn into secondaries. They're not primaries anymore, they're secondaries or tertiaries. Then they get sloughed off and forgotten. So you really have to make a determination to stay focused. This is why determination is one of the paramis—and why the Buddha's four qualities of determination cover all the paramis. You've got to make up your mind this is what you want, and you focus everything on this.

It's like playing chess. You have to be willing to loose some of your pawns and sometimes your knights and sometimes your bishops, but as long as you get checkmate, that's what matters. And it's the same with the practice: There will have to be sacrifice. There are things you have to give up, certain comforts, certain pleasures, even certain ideals or ideas that you've held very, very dearly. You realize that the ideal of the practice has to come first.

Sometimes you hear people scoffing at the idea of ideals in general as being something childish and immature, but that's not right. Look at the example of the Buddha himself, and all of the things he sacrificed for the sake of attaining the deathless. It's amazing when you think about it. Here he had attained the state of neither perception or non-perception, a very high refined state of concentration, which many people in those days thought was the ultimate, but it wasn't good enough for him. He wanted something better.

When he lived in the palace, became dissatisfied with the pleasures of the palace, even though everyone said, “This is as good as it gets.” He said there must be something better. And even if there’s not, it’s a dignified way to live your life to die in the attempt to find something better, not to just give in, not to just give up and say that’s just the way it is and leave it at that. There must be something better, something really good. And fortunately he found it. He stuck with his determination, all the way to the point where it really did yield the deathless.

So now the path is available. We have the reports that someone has found it and gone all the way. Other people have followed the path and reached the goal, too. So it’s now up to us to decide whether it’s an important fact of life: something that we want to accept as a challenge or just pretend didn’t happen.

Just make sure that you don’t get waylaid, you don’t get sidetracked. This is how the perfections become perfect. This is how they take top priority. As we follow through with that determination, there are four qualities that the Buddha lists as going together with determination.

The first is discernment, learning to see what’s important, learning to see clearly what has to be done to get to what’s important: understanding the path, what has to be developed, what has to be abandoned, and learning to make distinctions.

A while back I was leading a course on the perfections, and someone noticed that when you look at the list of ten perfections, it’s a pretty generic list of virtues. You go into any culture, any religious tradition, and they’ll all say that these are good things to develop. What makes them particularly Buddhist, though, is the element of discernment brought to each of them, so that we’re not just dealing in vague generalities or vague abstractions. We’re dealing with the virtues in a way that leads to awakening.

For instance, the perfection of goodwill: You have to have goodwill for everyone, but that doesn’t mean that you’re friends with everyone. There are some people who are worth being friends with, and other people, if you hang around with them or if you spend time associating with them, who will lead you down. So in cases like that, you have to pull back a little bit.

The same with equanimity and patience: There are some things you have to be equanimous about and other things that you can’t just let go, that you really have to work on. There are some things that you have to be patient with, some things you have to tolerate: difficult physical situations, the heat when it’s hot, the cold when it’s cold, pain when you’re ill. But unskillful thoughts in the mind, unskillful qualities in the mind: You can’t be patient with

them. You have to try to get rid of them, as the Buddha said, as if they were fire burning your head. Put them out with as much energy, mindfulness, and relentlessness as you can.

So it's important as you try and work on the perfections that you use your discernment to realize exactly what each perfection is and where you have to make distinctions that direct the perfection to awakening.

Once you've seen the distinctions, then the next quality is truthfulness. This means not only telling the truth but also *being* true to what needs to be done. If you see you need to work more on your meditation, you work more on your meditation. While you're working on it, you really focus on what you're doing, noticing what works, noticing what doesn't work. Like the cook who notices what his master likes and doesn't like: He doesn't wait to be told, he just notices when the master eats a certain curry, or ignores another one, reading that as a message. It's the same with the mind: The mind is giving off messages as to what's working and what's not. You've got to learn how to read those messages, so pay full attention.

The next quality is relinquishment, realizing that there are some things you've got to let go: like all those outside victories, or the idea of having to straighten out this person, deal with that person. You need to realize that some things are just not worth the effort. If they get in the way of your practice here, you've got to put them aside. Learn how to side-step issues.

Like that story of the Chinese marshal arts master: His students were going to have a demonstration one day in a pavilion off in the forest. On the road to the pavilion, there was a donkey, a well-known donkey, famous for being really nasty and mean, kicking anyone who came anywhere near it. So the students, who were coming before the master, decided they'd try some of their marshal arts skills against the donkey before they got to the pavilion. The first student went up to the donkey with one stance to deal with the donkey, and the donkey kicked him across the road. The second student came up and said, "You fool, that's not how it's done." He tried another stance, but the donkey kicked him across the road as well. This kept on until none of students had been able to deal with the donkey at all. They all got kicked across the road.

So they went to hide behind the bushes on the side of the road to see, when the master came, how he would handle the donkey. Well, the master came, he saw the donkey and walked way around, realizing there are some battles that are just not worth fighting. Even if you win, it's not really a victory.

So those are the things you've got to put aside, let go of. Focus on what really is important.

And then the final quality, which is calm: keeping the mind calm through all of this. When you find that little voice that says, “How can they get away with that?” you say, “Calm down.” “It’s outrageous what they did!” “Calm down.” “Why is this, why?” “Calm down.” Just keep keeping yourself calm.

This is one of the reasons that it’s important to develop good strong powers of concentration, so that you can maintain that sense of calm regardless. When it seems like the path is getting awfully long, you calm down. You just keep at it. The path has never been made shorter by getting upset about it. It’s made shorter by taking the next step, then the next step, so you have to be calm enough to take that step, focus on that step. All too often, we follow a path, but the mind is running back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, many, many times: thinking about where the end of the path is, coming back to where you were, going back to the beginning of the path—so no wonder it gets tired. You walked down the path once but the mind has been back and forth on the path a hundred times, making it longer than it has to be.

So when you find yourself getting worked up about issues, remember: Calm down. Getting worked up is not a factor of the path. It’s not one of the paramis, not one of the perfections. Keep your determination focused on things that are really important. It doesn’t matter how many pawns you lose as long as you reach checkmate. Even this body of ours: Someday we’re going to have to lose it, put it aside. So what really matters is the shape of your mind.

That’s why these factors of determination are important to keep in mind, because they put the perfections where they belong, at top priority. These qualities of mind that are your true treasure: Make sure they have top priority. If anything gets in the way of that top priority, just put it aside. That’s the kind of focus you need.