

A Clear Sense of Priorities

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Meditation doesn't happen in a vacuum. It takes place in the context of our lives. We tend to think of it as an activity where you pull out of your life and have time to be separate. But that's only part of the process. At the same time, you have to create the proper context in your life as a whole for the meditation to have a place.

This is why when the Buddha set out the factors of the path, it wasn't just right concentration or right view. It was a whole series of factors including right speech, right action, and right livelihood. And then he set the path in a larger context as well, your social context: the people you associate with, the way you associate with them—all of this is part of the path. So we have to look at our lives to see in what ways they're actually helping our practice and what ways they're getting in the way. Because the practice isn't something you just stick into the cracks of your life and not expect it to make a major change in your life.

The Bodhi tree is a good symbol for the practice. A Bodhi tree has very invasive roots. You plant it next to a house and it can destroy the house, moving the foundation around. When the practice begins to take root in your life, ideally you begin to see that you look at things in your life in different ways. You relate to people in different ways; you relate to your old set of values in different ways. Friendships that used to be satisfying sometimes no longer are. You're looking for different things in your friends now. If you have a job, you begin to look for different things from your job.

This is the way it should be, because the practice isn't meant just as a type of therapy for people who want to hang onto their lives as they otherwise always have been. It's for people who want to stop and evaluate their lives, to see what really is important and what's not—and to focus more and more of their time on the areas that really are important, that really deserve top priority.

When you begin to ask those questions, you find that the practice starts making deeper inroads in the mind and really benefits you in ways that it couldn't have otherwise. On a very simple level, take the practice of being mindful as you go through your daily activities. Now, mindfulness here covers both mindfulness and alertness. In other words, have a strong sense of your frame of reference, as a person practicing meditation. A strong sense that your mind is affected not only by what other people do to you but also by what you do, in fact most directly by

what you do. So you want to be careful about what you do, careful about what you say.

As this sort of mindfulness becomes a more constant feature of your life, it'll have an impact on the way you meditate when you're sitting on the cushion here with your eyes closed. And again, the way you meditate while you're sitting here will have an impact on the way you lead your life. The more they help each other along, the stronger both of them will be. If you can maintain mindfulness, maintain alertness throughout the day, then when the time comes to sit down and meditate, the mind is right there.

If you let it wander off, it's like a dog on a long leash. It wanders around, wrapping the leash around telephone poles and trees and bushes and benches. When the time comes to pull it back, it's a long, complicated process to unwind the leash. But if you can keep your mind on a short leash throughout the day, then when the time comes to sit down and meditate, here it is, right here. You can get right down to work. That allows a sense of momentum to build up.

At the same time, the stronger your mindfulness as you meditate and the stronger your alertness, the more solid your concentration. That helps put the mind in a frame of reference where you can look at your life and really see what's important, what's not important. And as these qualities have been exercised, you have a stronger mind to take out with you into daily life.

So the two parts of the practice help each other along.

And you begin to notice in certain aspects of your life that things you used to be very casual about, sometimes you can't be casual about them anymore. For example, the way you speak, the way you express your sense of humor, is something you really have to be careful about. In America, the number one way of saying something humorous is basically to lie in a clever way. That goes right against right speech, so you have to watch out for it.

When you do, you begin to realize that you're more in touch with what you say, and that what you say has more value. And you find other, more helpful ways of expressing your sense of humor. Life as a meditator is not humorless. In fact, the more you begin to see life for what it is, you can't help but be struck by the ironies that riddle life. And the truthful sense of humor that comes from that sense of irony is something worth listening to—a lot more than most people's sense of humor. So it's good not only for yourself, but also for the people around you, just to be careful about these things.

You'll also start looking at the people you associate with from the perspective of your meditation. Which ones are helpful? Which ones are harmful? As we were talking about earlier today, learn how to be polite but firm in resisting the

influence of the harmful people on your mind. Sometimes you have to associate them, it's unavoidable, so in cases like that you'll have to learn ways of being with them without picking up their attitudes, without picking up their way of looking at things. Learn how to look for people whose attitudes are more helpful. This may affect your choice of a career, along with the way you live your life in general. Well, it's important that you make those choices in the light of the meditation. Because the mind is your most important possession and you want to be able to get through life with at the very least the good qualities of your mind intact. At best, you want to lead a life that is actively helpful in improving the state of your mind.

So it's not just a question of learning to find time to stick in a little meditation here and there in the cracks of your life so the rest of life becomes bearable. Meditation *should* have a pervasive influence on your life. Maybe the word meditation is too narrow for indicating the impact it should have on your life. After all, the Pali word for meditation is *bhavana*, which means to develop, developing good qualities in the mind. And that's something you can do in any context. But you'll find that some contexts are more conducive than others, so choose to place yourself in those contexts as much as you can.

This is what mindfulness means: not just being alert to what's happening but also keeping in mind your true priorities in the practice and looking out for ways to maintain that sense of priorities. That way, your life becomes more and more of a piece, more and more *at* peace as well. Because if your priorities are pulling you in all sorts of different directions, it's very hard to gain a sense of how you should live your life, and nothing solid gets accomplished. But if your priorities are clear, a lot of the issues in life get cleared up as well. The mind has a greater and greater sense of well-being, because it's not being pulled and scattered all over the place. It's gathered together in going in one very important direction. And that's the sign of a life well-lived.