

Actualizing Your Potentials

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There's a school of psychology that believes that people are happiest when they actualize their full potential in all areas of life: spiritually, physically, financially, intellectually, emotionally. What that actually produces is very harried and frazzled people. If you try to fully realize all your different potentials and to excel in every area, you wear yourself out. Human life is too short. The amount of energy we have is too limited.

This means that you have to figure out what's important in life and focus your energies there. As for the other things you have to do, anything worth doing is worth doing reasonably well. You need a clear sense of priorities, otherwise everything gets done to a small extent, a certain extent, but you find yourself pulled in so many different directions that you yourself get torn apart, over-extended.

So the first lesson in bringing the practice into your life is to simplify, prioritize. You find that by focusing on doing fewer things, you actually get more accomplished.

Years back when my brother was in graduate business school, at the start of the first semester he realized that the amount of work he was assigned to do is humanly impossible. It would require that he stay up to weird hours of the night, and of course in forcing yourself that much and pushing yourself that much, the quality of your work is going to get compromised. So he realized what the professors were doing. They were presenting him with a real-life problem, which is that you're always going to have too much work presented to you. Discernment lies in realizing what has to be done and what can be put aside, what's important and what's not.

A good lesson for any businessman, and of course a good lesson for any Dharma practitioner. As the Buddha pointed out, he taught only one thing, focused on one main issue, which was the issue of suffering and how to put an end to it. That, he said, is the big issue in life. If you can take care of that issue, then you've really accomplished the best thing a human being can accomplish. The other things that get taken care of are subsidiary.

So an important part of the practice is to look at your life and see where you're taking on too many responsibilities, trying to actualize too many potentials, and see what it is in your power to cut away or at least to push off to the sidelines. This is a decision that we each have to make for ourselves, as to what's important,

what's not. There's no one clear answer across the board. But of course, the issue of suffering keeps forcing itself on all of us, and it's important that we understand where it actually comes from, because that helps us prioritize.

As the Buddha said, the real suffering in the mind comes from craving and ignorance, and specifically, three kinds of craving: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming. It's not that all desires are bad. In fact, the desire to get rid of unskillful qualities and the desire to encourage skillful qualities are part of the path, under right effort. We're not here just watching things coming and going, arising and passing away, in a passive way. We want to understand arising and passing away so that we can figure out the unskillful qualities that keep coming back to the mind. We figure them out so that we can try to put an end to them. We also want to understand how skillful qualities like mindfulness and alertness can be nurtured so that we can strengthen them and keep them continuous.

These are the big issues in life: figuring out which desires are good and which ones are bad, which ones are useful and which ones are actually the problem. That means we need to be able to have time and space to look at our own minds and to pass accurate judgment on our desires.

So you have to ask yourself: How does your life help in giving you that time, giving you that space? When you look at your life realistically, you realize that some of your jobs really are oppressive and demanding. They really impinge on the amount of time and energy you can give to this project, in which case you have to learn how to bear those responsibilities lightly. Not that you're irresponsible, but you don't carry them around in your mind all the time. You have a sense of how to let them go, when to let them go.

We were talking the other night about learning how to take a vacation for yourself as you meditate. You come to meditation and you often bring in the issues of the day along with you. An important part of concentration practice is learning how to get out of the mindset that holds on to those issues, to get out of that little world of becoming, and create concentration as a type of becoming instead, in which you're a different person with different desires, different concerns, so at the very least you have time to put those burdens aside. That way, your mind doesn't have to be deformed by carrying the same weight around all the time.

You used to see that in Thailand with the coolies who carried huge loads off the ships: Their bodies were bent all out of shape from carrying loads all day long. Even when they weren't carrying the loads, they were bent over. For many of us that's how our minds are, bent out of shape, carrying the same loads day after day

after day without ever really putting them down. So part of the practice lies in learning how to put those things down and to stand up straight, to see your identity in your job, in your family, and the other identities you take on in the course of the day, as alien worlds, strange worlds, exotic worlds, so you don't get sucked in to the values that those identities and their attendant worlds carry with them.

But it's not enough just to learn how to be able to put them aside from time to time. It's also good to have a certain detachment from them even as you're carrying them around, even as you're working on those responsibilities, taking on those jobs. Try to develop a sense of the mind as an observer, watching separately, so that you're not totally sucked into that particular world, not totally sucked into that particular identity. You realize that it's an identity that you're assuming. It's a role that you play.

When actors on the stage are playing a role, the difficulty for them is in learning how to get into the role. In real life though, our difficulty lies in learning how to get *out* of the role, i.e., you play the role convincingly and responsibly, but you need to have a part of the mind that's outside and separate, so that when you suffer setbacks in the course of the day, not all of the mind is suffering the setback. Part of it can just watch. Like an anthropologist watching the values of a strange society, empathetic, trying to understand, but at the same time realizing that they are strange. They're not part of the innate nature of who you are. After all, "who you are" is a construct. It's a fabrication. As long as you understand that, it's a lot easier to step out of the various roles you play, and the various identities you assume, so that whatever a setback that particular identity suffers, it's not necessarily a setback for all of you.

This way, you learn how to wear your responsibilities more lightly. When you can do that, the demands of each of your different identities are easier to prioritize. You're not totally sucked into the worldview that each identity carries around. You're not totally sucked into the idea that each identity has to be perfected and that you have to work at actualizing its fullest potentials.

This myth of having to actualize your full potential is one of the biggest burdens you can carry around. It's good to learn how to put it aside. Keep reminding yourself that what's really important is understanding how your mind creates suffering, no matter what the situation. Even though things in the world can get pretty dire, the mind isn't totally in there in that world of the dire. Your awareness can step back and look at it, realizing that the perceptions and feelings of that world, if you pull them into the mind, can cause you to suffer. But you don't have to pull them into the mind.

When you keep that sense of distance, you can deal with setbacks a lot more effectively, remembering that the most important thing is to learn and act in a skillful way, i.e., with a minimum amount of greed, anger, and delusion, trying to be as harmless as possible. After all, whatever responsibilities we take on, whatever jobs we take on, there's a constant refrain in the forest tradition that the work of the world never ends. People retire from their jobs not because they've completed the job so that no one has to do it again. It's simply because they've run out of strength, run out of interest, but the work still needs to be done, simply that someone else may or may not pick it up.

So the world is never going to be perfected. Of course, we're all going to pass from this particular state of becoming, this particular human life, on to another life. And what are you going to carry with you? The qualities of the mind you've developed, in particular, the insights you gain into the workings of the mind, how it causes suffering and how it can be trained not to cause suffering. That's going to be the most valuable lesson you can take with you. So that should have top priority.

So try to give yourself as many vacations from your various identities as you can manage. And don't be afraid to take on the identity of a meditator. I don't know how many times I've heard it said that you've got to drop your identity as a meditator so that there's no self in there at all. Well, you're not going to be able to meditate until you're secure in being a meditator, a wise meditator, someone who has a good sense of how far you can push yourself at any particular time, and when you have to pull back a little bit; when you're squeezing the quail in your hands to the point it dies, or when you're holding it so loosely that it flies away; what's the right amount of pressure to put on the practice at any given time.

Knowing that is part of being a skilled meditator. That's a good identity to develop. Have that in your repertoire. The meditator can look at the various identities you have in life and see them as an anthropologist would see the worldviews and customs of a foreign culture, both inside and out. If you learn how to carry that sense of being a little bit outside of all your other identities as you go through life, you'll find that they weigh way less heavily on the mind. And you're developing an important skill.

The beginning of wisdom or the beginning of discernment lies in this ability to get a sense of what's really important and what's not. Back in the time of the Buddha, there was a list of the hot issues of the day: Is the world eternal or is it not eternal? Is it finite or is it infinite? Is the life force the same thing as your body or is it separate from the body? What happens to a person who's fully awakened? Does that person still exist or not or both or neither? People would come to the

Buddha with this list of questions and he would refuse to answer or take a stand on any of them. The people would get really upset. They thought he was being irresponsible. But as he said, trying to find an answer for those questions doesn't really lead you to awakening. And they come from attitudes in the mind that shouldn't be encouraged.

Nowadays we have different lists of questions. It might be useful to sit down sometime and ask yourself, what are the questions you've been living by, with a belief that you have to get an answer to them? Then ask yourself, are those questions really important? Do they help understand suffering or do they get in the way?

When you start looking at your life in terms of the Buddha's priorities, you find it a lot easier to sort things out as to which duties you have to take very seriously, and which duties you can get by with doing reasonably well; which potentials you have or worth developing, which ones are not. As I said, our time is limited. Our energy is limited. You want to focus it on all the work that really is important. Make sure that gets done. If you have any spare time left over beyond that, fine. But make sure that your top priority gets the time and attention it deserves.