

A World of Limitations

October 3, 2006

Life is full of limitations. We only have so much time here, not very much. Even what's considered a long life—100 years—is really not all that much. When it's over, it's all gone. And while we're alive, we only have so much energy. On top of that, we're hemmed in by the limitations of the body. It needs food. It needs clothing, shelter, medicine. It needs time to sleep. All these things place limitations on what you can do, where you can go. There are a lot of beautiful places on this planet where you can't go because there's too little oxygen or there's no food at all.

So in the midst of these limitations, we're trying to find a happiness that's lasting, that's worthwhile. There are two possible ways of trying to find that happiness: One is to pretend that there are no limitations, but no matter how much you pretend, you keep running into them. The other way is to be very clear about what the limitations are. Then you can find your way around them, basically work from within the system to overthrow the system. That's what we're doing.

One of the limitations we have to be really clear about is that there are only so many things we can do and there are restrictions on our actions. You can't change the laws of cause and effect. In other words, you act with a particular kind of intention, and it's going to have that kind of result. Actions do have their results, depending on the quality of mind with which you do the action, and the quality of mind you have when you receive the results. That's *the* big fact of life right there. So we learn how not to fight it, but how to use it to our advantage.

This means that time spent developing good qualities of mind is time well spent because they're going to shape everything else. Almost everyone will agree that that's so, but then the question arises: How about all the other things we can do in life? This is where the limitations come in again. How much time do you have to spend on developing the mind? As for the other pleasures that you can pursue, to what extent do they help train the mind, and to what extent do they get in the way? Most of us are like people who would like to have our cake and enlightenment too. We'd like to play chess, win the game, and not lose any of our pieces in the process. But that's not how you win at chess. You have to be willing to sacrifice some of your pieces. You have to realize that you can't get everything you want. Some of the things you want actually get in the way of training the mind.

So it's up to you to decide: Does this training of the mind really have top priority in your life? And to what extent are you willing to sacrifice other things for the sake of training the mind?

The Buddha has a teaching on making vows, determining what's important in life, and there are four qualities you have to bring to any vow you make, any goal you set for yourself.

The first one is discernment, being able to discern what's important, what goals really are worthwhile, what obstacles you're going to have to overcome in order to get there, what things you're going to have to do, and what things you're going to give up: in other words, really understanding the territory.

Once you decide that something really is worth the effort that's going to go into it, then the next quality is truthfulness. You really stick with it, do whatever is required. Training the mind requires mindfulness; it requires alertness. So we develop those qualities in meditation. It requires concentration and discernment. It requires other qualities as well, the qualities we tend to associate more with the heart, in terms of goodwill, compassion, and equanimity. It's a long list. If you were to take down the list of all the qualities the Buddha recommended, it'd be very long.

So we have to work on many fronts. Other qualities are more associated with the will: determination, endurance. There's a whole cluster of qualities we've got to develop here. When you see that's so, okay, you decide that whatever's required, you'll do. That's the quality of truthfulness: You really stick with your vision of what's important in life.

Then there's relinquishment. This is where renunciation comes in, when you realize that there are certain things you're going to have to give up for the sake of your goal. It's a trade-off. For most people the idea of renunciation is deprivation, a limitation. Well, as I said, life has its limitations. Renunciation means learning to work intelligently from within those limitations to get beyond them, realizing that you don't have time for everything, so you want to focus your efforts on what's important and give up whatever is not, whatever is going to get in the way.

The final quality is calm. This functions in two ways. One, on the path, you learn how to keep your mind calm and not get upset about the things you've got to give up. Learn to maintain a mature perspective on what you're doing. Realize that there are going to be dry patches, so you learn how to deal with them with good grace and good humor.

One of my students, a monk in Thailand, spent years up in the forest and, as he admitted, there were long months when his meditation didn't seem to be going anywhere at all. Here he had given up everything to stay in a little tiny hut in the

forest, living on a very, very basic diet to find seclusion, yet his meditation wasn't going anywhere. So he found ways to entertain himself and to keep himself going, simply with the thought, "Well, at least I'm developing endurance, and that's a perfection." When you can keep a good humor about whatever's coming up, that's a part of calm. So you don't get upset about lack of progress or actual regressions, even when you see your mind deteriorating right in front of you. You learn to treat it with good humor. That's part of the ability to keep a perspective on things. That's what enables you to make it all away to the end.

Then of course there's the calm that comes at the end, when you've finally achieved your goal.

We live in a world where unfinished business is pretty much the order of the day. You wake up every morning and there's always something to do. And in all the different tasks in the world, there's really nothing that comes to an absolute conclusion. You give up on a task usually because something else more pressing, more important comes in. And when people stop working, it's not because the work is done. It's usually because they get too old or too incompetent or whatever, and they have to retire.

But there is something that can be done, that can be brought to a real conclusion, and that's putting an end to suffering. That's the one task where they can truly say, "The task is done." This is one of the constant refrains in the texts, when someone becomes an arahant and has finally gotten rid of all the defilements: "The task is done. What had to be done has been completed."

You can imagine the intense sense of calm that comes with that.

So it's important, as you meditate, to think about where all this is going. If you're just on a little retreat for a couple days, they encourage you not to have goals, because most of our goals are set out of ignorance. A weekend retreat is much too little time to say, "Well, I want to attain that level of jhana or gain this level of insight." You tend to screw yourself up if that's your attitude. But when you think about meditation as a lifelong process, that's when you really have to be clear about your goals, clear about your priorities. If you're not, everything else in the world comes in and clutters up your time.

I was talking this evening to one of our ex-monks, and I asked him, "How's your meditation going?" There was an embarrassed silence and then an embarrassed little laugh at the other end of line. His meditation wasn't going anywhere because he wasn't doing it anymore. He disrobed with the best intentions that he would make sure to meditate every day. But then this, that, and the other thing just came in and nibbled away at his time, and then started gobbling up his time, until there was nothing left. This is what happens when you

don't have a very clear set of priorities and clear set of goals in how you're going to get there.

So these qualities of discernment in choosing your goal, choosing how you're going to get there, truthfulness in sticking with the path, relinquishing whatever else gets in the way, and then maintaining a good-humored attitude of calm that can deal with the ups and downs so that you can get to the ultimate calm that will be your goal: It's good to be clear about these things and then look at your life, to see what fits in with what's really important to you, and what doesn't.

And be willing to make the trade. Because if you can't make that trade, you'll never get anything of solid value. This life of one hundred years, if it does last a hundred years, would end up scattered all over the place. When it come to the end, you'll say, "Gee, what was that all about?" Because it wasn't about anything, and that was because you didn't make it anything. That's the problem. If you want it to be something, you have to make something out of it. It's up to you to make that decision and then to stick with it. That's when you're going to see results.