To Have a Purpose

August 28, 2022

We've come here with a purpose: We want to get our minds still. We want to develop good qualities of the mind. So we've come to meditate. And as we begin to see the results appearing, we can see the happiness that comes from having a purpose.

Everything we do has a purpose of one kind or another. Every movement of the mind has its purpose. Even when we try to get the mind really, really still, there's a purpose in getting it still: so that we can gain insights, so that the insights can release the mind. There's only one thing and one possibility in human experience that doesn't have a purpose, and that's *nibbāna*. That's because your purpose has been achieved.

But up until that point, you have to make sure that your purposes are in line with what will actually bring happiness, because our problem, as we're born, is that we have many purposes going off in many directions. It's like being tied to several different horses, all pulling in different directions all at once.

One of the Buddha's images is of six animals. Each animal is tied to a leash, and the leashes are all tied together. You've got a crocodile, a monkey, a hyena, a snake, a bird, and a dog, and they'll pull in different directions.

We usually end up getting pulled apart by these things, because everything is based on desire, and we have many, many desires. One of the things the Buddha recommended is to try to find one thing that you really want more than anything else, and make that your determination. That means you've got to focus on *that* desire and all of the desires in harmony with that. As for the desires *not* in harmony with that, you want to let them go. That way, this life can be used to accomplish something.

After all, you're born with a human body. You're born with a human mind. And the Buddha's saying you can use that human body and you can use that human mind to find true happiness. In other words, your actions do come out of your mind, they are based on your choices, and they do have results.

He goes on further to say that you can actually act in a way that leads beyond action. Even though this human body and human mind are subject to aging, illness, and death, you can devote them to something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die.

You compare this with what some materialists say, which is that the human world is predetermined by physical forces over which we have no control. We

think we're making choices, but *we're* not making the choices. We think we're the ones who decide to do this, decide to do that, but actually our bodies are being forced by physical forces. That's basically saying that you have a human body, and you have a human mind, but you can't use them for anything. Why people would want to believe that, I have no idea, unless they just don't like the idea of being held responsible for their actions.

But the Buddha's saying No, you do have the right of choice, and your choices can take you far. Now, he can't prove that to you until you've gained awakening. In other words, you have to take it on as a working hypothesis first. But it's a good hypothesis, because if it is true that your actions can accomplish a lot, this is a hypothesis that doesn't get in the way of your potential for genuine happiness. It actually opens the way to accomplishing as much as you can. So why choose the hypothesis that closes off the doors?

The problem is that our desires go in so many different directions. They can pull us left, right, up, down. If we don't bring some order to them, they just drag us around and around and around, here and there, here and there, without accomplishing anything.

Think of the Buddha's knowledge of his previous lifetimes. Each time he was born with a certain appearance in a certain class of beings. He remembered the kind of pleasures he had, the kind of pains he had, the kind of food he ate, then how he died. Over and over and over again: birth, pleasure, pain, food, death; birth, pleasure, pain, food, death. And as he said, going from one life to the next is like throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it lands on this end. Sometimes it lands on that end. Sometimes it lands splat in the middle.

It was only in the second watch of the night—when he gained knowledge into seeing how all beings die and then are reborn in line with their karma—that he saw the larger pattern. But even then, the larger pattern for most beings is just going around and around and around.

It was in the third watch of the night that he found that there was a way out. And that, he said, was the noble search. If you're going to have a purpose for your life, that's the best possible one, because otherwise you look for happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die, and then you're back to where you were before—or worse. But if you can find something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die, that would be a worthwhile search, a worthwhile use of your life, a worthwhile purpose for your life, because once you've attained your purpose, it doesn't leave you.

We think of him. We think of all the noble disciples that followed him. They devoted their lives to a good purpose. They can do it. We can do it, too. But they

did it by making a strong determination that this is what they wanted. And as we learn, the Buddha said there are four elements that go into a good determination.

The first is discernment. You look at what would be a good goal. You decide: The best goal possible would be one that doesn't change, a happiness you can depend on.

Then you take a discerning look at what you have to do in order to get there. What you learn when you read the texts and think about them is the basic principles. But you can get the details only by actually putting the principles into practice. There are three sources for discernment: There's listening, there's thinking, and then there's actually developing the qualities of the mind that are talked about in what you've listened to and what you've thought about.

All three of those types of discernment have to go together. Your discernment gets sharper as you put what you've learned and thought about into practice, and then reflect on what you've done. See when you get good results, when you get bad results. What can you do if there are bad results? What can you do to make them better?

In this way, discernment is a process that comes from committing yourself to the practice and reflecting on what you're doing, and committing again and reflecting again.

Now, to get the most out of this process, you have to be true: true in what you're doing, and then true in your reflection, being true to yourself about asking yourself—what exactly did you do? And what exactly were the results you got? It's only in this way that you can find the truth: in other words, what needs to be done better.

In the course of devoting yourself to this practice, there will be some things you have to give up. It's like planting a garden of trees. You start out and may decide that you want to have all the different trees you like, and you might want to include some eucalyptus because they smell nice. But then you realize, if you plant the eucalyptus trees, they're going to kill everything else—a lot of the trees that have more use.

So you have to be selective: what kind of happiness you're going to go for, what kind of happiness you're just going to say, "This is not me. This is not mine. This is just pulling me away from what I really want." There's a verse in the Dhammapada: The wise person sees that if there's a greater happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, he or she is willing to abandon the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater one. It sounds simple—so simple, in fact, that a British translator of the Dhammapada added a footnote to that verse, saying

there must be another meaning to the verse that we don't know about, because it's just too simple.

Well, it may be simple as a principle, but it's not simple to practice. All too often, that lesser happiness is something that comes quickly, without effort, whereas the greater happiness requires effort and dedication. It's going to take time. And here, again, you have to bring in your discernment and your truthfulness—your discernment to remind yourself that you really do want to go for the long term, and your truthfulness in staying loyal to your determination. So you have to learn how to talk to yourself to get yourself past those times when there's something you really want, but it's going to get in the way of what's of higher value.

This is where you have to learn how to calm the mind, which is the fourth quality of a good determination: how to talk to yourself in such a way that you're okay with abandoning the lesser happiness. You don't get upset. You don't get worked up. You can keep in mind that you really will benefit.

We hear so much about not-self, and sometimes people say, "Well, there's nobody here to benefit from the practice." But the Buddha never talked in that way, even when he was teaching not-self. As he said: "Suppose someone came and was burning the leaves here in the orchard. Would you say they're burning *me?*" No, of course not, because the leaves aren't you, and they don't belong to you. "In the same way," he said, "let go of whatever is not you or yours, and that will be for your long-term welfare and happiness." The Buddha's having you do this for *your* welfare and happiness. Think about that. You always want to keep that in mind.

So, when you have these four qualities of discernment, truth, relinquishment, and calm, then you've got all the perfections covered right there. Discernment covers not only the perfection of discernment, but also the perfection of goodwill, because that's what the Buddha's discernment or his wisdom is all about: how to find a happiness that's totally harmless, totally secure. When you act on that desire, it's both wise and a way of showing a lot of goodwill for yourself and for others. When you develop the quality of truth, that includes the perfection of virtue, the perfection of truth, and the perfection of persistence. When you develop relinquishment, there's still more persistence, along with the perfection of giving and the perfection of renunciation. Then finally, as you calm the mind, there's the perfection of endurance and the perfection of equanimity. You've got all the perfections right there.

So you've got the potential for what you need to put an end to suffering and to get to the other side of the river, because that's one of the things that the word *pāramī* for "perfection" means. The Buddha's image is of being on an unsafe shore

of a river and seeing that the other shore of the river is safe. You want to get across, so you build a raft. And what do you build a raft from? You build it from the twigs and branches on this side of the river. In other words, you take the things that you've been holding on to and that have been causing you to suffer—feelings, perceptions, thought-constructs—and you turn them into the path that will take you across. Like right effort: That requires a lot of thinking, a lot of fabricating of your thoughts, because you're doing this for a purpose. When the Buddha describes the aggregate of fabrication, that's what he talks about: Every fabrication is for a purpose. We're putting our lives together for a purpose already, so we might as well find a good purpose and do a good job of it.

That's what determination is for. It's to take these potentials we have and say: "What's the best thing we can do with them? Let's do that." That's what will get you across.