

The Meaning of Insight

September 1, 2019

As you sit here, you'll be making choices for the entire hour. The primary choice will be whether to stay with the breath. You made up your mind at the beginning of the session that that's what you're going to do. See what happens when you stick with that decision. Each time the question comes up and there's a little stirring of a thought in the mind, try to choose to come back to the breath. Let the thought go, unless it's a thought that's related to the breath and is helpful for getting the mind to settle down.

The mind is always making choices, both when you're meditating and when you're not. In fact, that's its primary activity: choosing what to do. As the Buddha says, we fabricate the aggregates for the sake of using them. So that gives us two things right there: goals—what the Buddha calls *attha*—and means toward the goals. This is the way the mind functions. This is the way it gropes through the world, learning about things, learning what works, what doesn't work, which kinds of goals are possible, which ones are not.

And it's because of this activity that life has meaning. If we weren't making any choices, if we were machines—spinning wheels for no purpose—there'd be no meaning to it at all. This is one of the reasons why the word for “goal” in Pali is also the word for “meaning”: *attha*. We look for meanings, instructions, or advice on what are good goals and what are good things to do, what's worth doing, what's not worth doing, for the sake of those goals. Even when you think of the meaning of words: In some cases, the meanings get translated into other words, but then you start thinking about what is the meaning of the fact that we have language? It's one of our tools for finding what we want beyond the words. And if something gets us to what we want, then it has meaning. That's where the meaning of words goes beyond other words. Life itself, in that case, has meaning. You could say that we live by meanings.

I've been reading an account of Knud Rasmussen going by dog-sled across northern North America. He was interviewing a lot of different shamans, storytellers, and poets among the Inuit. And he was always interested in finding out the meanings of their stories. There was a case where one of the storytellers told him a story about a fox and a wolf. The fox tells the wolf that he's learned how to use his tail to catch fish. The wolf wants to know how to do that. He'd like to have some extra fish in his diet. So the fox says, “Well, you dig a hole in the ice, then you stick your tail down into the hole, and if you feel anything nibbling at the end of the tail, you pull it out, and there you've got a fish.”

So the wolf does as he's told, and the fox gets out of there as fast as he can, because he knows what's going to happen. The wolf's tail gets frozen into the ice. So what does he have to do? He has to bite off his tail. Of course, he's furious at the fox, and he goes looking for him. The fox sees him coming, so he takes some leaves and he holds them in front of his eyes, so that the wolf can't recognize him. The wolf comes up to him and says, "Have you seen that other fox?" And the fox says, "I'm sorry, I haven't seen anything. I'm snow-blind right now, which is why I have to hold these leaves in front of my eyes." The wolf believes him and goes away. End of story.

Rasmussen asked the storyteller, "What is the meaning of that story?" And the storyteller said, "Why do you have to have a meaning? This is the problem with all you white people: You have to have meanings for things." Well, in one way the storyteller was right, and in another way he was wrong. If the story were totally meaningless, if it weren't amusing, if it weren't entertaining, there would be no purpose in telling it. It does have a purpose, which is entertainment. But it doesn't have a moral, aside from how you have to be really careful around foxes.

But for the most part, most of our stories do have meanings in the sense that we look for what they tell us about how to conduct our lives. Those are the satisfying stories, the stories that give us some sense of direction, some advice on what's a good attitude to take to life. So it's only natural that we look for the meanings of things, which we can then translate into how we make choices in our lives. This is why the Dhamma has an *attha*, a meaning, a purpose. It's designed to satisfy that desire. It gives us a worthwhile goal. And it gives us a means to the goal, what's worth doing that will take us to the goal.

That's what insight is all about: teaching us what's worth doing for the sake of a really high level goal—putting an end to suffering. Sometimes you hear insight defined as just seeing the nature of things. Well, what good is that, unless there's something about the nature of things that you can put into action to serve your purposes? That's why the Buddha's basic teachings for insight are the four noble truths. First, he teaches the problem, the cause of the problem, and then he teaches the means for solving the problem, in other words, the noble eightfold path. The result is that you arrive at the cessation of suffering, the third noble truth. That's the goal.

When you see the goal, then you know that you really have gained insight and you've used your insight properly. This is why stream-entry is defined as attaining the noble eightfold path, and a large part of the noble eightfold path is right view, the four noble truths. A person who's attained the stream is said to be consummate in view. In other words, you've really seen all four truths.

There's that description of stream-entry as seeing that whatever is subject to origination is all subject to passing away. It sounds like you're simply seeing the

nature of things to come and go. But you have to stop and think: What is the state of mind to which that insight would naturally occur? If it's just a generalization about how life has been so far—everything you've seen so far seems to come and go—it's a pretty sloppy observation. You can't prove that it applies to everything. The only time you can prove it is if you see something that's *not* subject to origination, and you see that that doesn't pass away. When Sariputta attained his first experience of the Dhamma eye, he then went to tell Moggallana. This was before they had met the Buddha. Moggallana sees him coming from afar and says, "Your complexion is clear, your faculties are bright. Have you seen the deathless?" And Sariputta says, "Yes."

So it's from seeing the deathless that you can look back on things that are not deathless, and you realize that the difference is that they are subject to origination and passing away, but the deathless is not.

So it's in seeing that that insight becomes complete. And this is what insight is good for. This is what it means. Sometimes you hear that insight is seeing things in terms of the three characteristics. But then the three characteristics, or more property the three perceptions: What are they good for? If you simply say, "Well everything is impermanent," what does that tell you about what to do? You could take that observation and do all kinds of things with it. You could decide that nothing is worth striving for at all, so you might as well give up. In other words, that insight on its own can be used for very defeatist purposes.

You use these perceptions properly when you put them in the context of the four noble truths, or when you put them in the context of the analysis the Buddha has for learning how to gain escape from the things that weigh the mind down. You see their origination, you see their passing away, you see their allure, and then you see their drawbacks. And it's in the context of trying to see their drawbacks that you apply those three perceptions: You look to see the extent to which they're inconstant, stressful, not self, so that you can develop dispassion for them. That dispassion is going to be your escape to the deathless.

So those observations have meaning only in the larger context of the meaning of the Dhamma, the goal of the Dhamma, its *attha*. This is why, when the Buddha described his awakening, he never mentioned the three characteristics, or even the three perceptions. They're there implicitly in terms of the duties of the four noble truths, under the insight into the drawbacks of the things that weigh the mind down for the sake of developing dispassion. But the Buddha never explicitly mentions them. He's explicit about the four noble truths. He says that when you see those truths and see them clearly—in the same way that a person standing on the bank of a pool of clean water would look into the pool and see the fish moving around and resting in the water:

When you see all four noble truths clearly in that way, that's when insight has shown what it's good for. That's what its *attha* is, its purpose is.

So we're here not to learn so much about the nature of things outside. We're here more to learn about the actions of the mind as it's making choices, and which choices are worth making to get to a goal that doesn't serve as a means to anything else. That's when we find something that really satisfies the heart and mind, something that has intrinsic meaning. This meaning doesn't depend on pointing to something else or serving a purpose for the sake of something else. It's the one thing that we do everything else for the sake of. We all want true happiness. That's what we're groping around in the world for, as we make our choices and then learn from them—or sometimes don't learn from them. The Buddha simply gives instructions on how to go about it well.

Use appropriate attention. Ask the right questions. Look at your actions. Train the mind so that it's in a position where it can see its actions and their results really clearly. That's why we're here right now. The breath is here to train the mind. We train the mind for the sake of true happiness. These are all means to a goal, although you don't get to the goal by focusing on the goal or trying to clone the goal. You get there by paying attention to the means and doing them really carefully. Still, it's good to have in the back of the mind the realization that this does serve a purpose, and to have a general idea of what that purpose is. Because that's what gives meaning to the practice and keeps us on course.