

Meaning & Importance

July 7, 2021

We go through life making choices. This is why our lives have meaning. If we made no choices, we'd be like machines: gears turning around but with no purpose. At least the machine itself has no purpose. There are people who give a purpose to the machine, but that's because they're the ones making choices.

Our choices shape our experience. As the Buddha says, we take the potentials for form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness, and we fabricate them into actual forms, feelings, etc., *for the sake of* something. Usually for the sake of happiness, which means that every present moment has a for-the-sake-of in it. It's moving in a direction. It's a means to an end. That's why things have meanings. They're aimed at something.

This is why memory plays a large role in our experience, because it gives us guidance in how to shape things. This is the main reason why our memories have meaning: because they've given us lessons. We can think of things we did well in the past, things that we did poorly in the past, and we can take it all as a lesson. We have memories that have meaning for us personally, memories that give meaning to us in the world at large and give us a sense of the importance of our choices.

And the Buddha does have us cultivate memory in a certain way for the sake of the path. This is what right mindfulness is all about: the things we should keep in mind. How we keep them in mind forms part of the path, an important part of the path. As the Buddha said, right mindfulness hovers around every other path factor. Once we have right view, we need right mindfulness to remember right view so that we can exert right effort to give rise to all the other the right factors.

So we're not totally abandoning memory as we focus on the present moment. Instead, we're learning how to use it well. It's just that there are other memories that come up as we meditate. From the point of the view of the practice, we have to learn how to see them in light of the Dhamma as to whether they're going to be meaningful for us or not. We have to learn how to put aside the question of what's meaningful for us personally in terms of our sense of self and our role in

the world, because those kinds of meanings can actually get in the way of what's meaningful for the practice.

Think of the Buddha on the night of his awakening. First watch of the night: memories of many past lives going back hundreds of thousands of eons, lots of details that he could have fed on if he had wanted to—and there were meditators in the past who did just that. They gained memories of past lifetimes, and that's how they set themselves up as teachers, telling people what they had seen. But the Buddha had so many memories that they all began to be meaningless. As he said, what did he remember? His appearance, his name, his experience of pleasure and pain, the food he ate, and how he died. Over and over again: eating and dying, eating and dying. He wondered: Is there a pattern to all this? Is there a lesson to be drawn?

That's where he got into the second knowledge, where he saw the whole universe of beings dying and being reborn in line with their actions. Their actions were shaped by their views, and their views by who they associated with. Again, he could have spent the whole of his life feeding off of that knowledge. But the fact that he saw the pattern raised the question: Could this all be put to an end? Because it's pretty meaningless: Beings rise and then they fall, rise and then fall, time and time again. When will they ever get a rest?

He saw that *intentions*, which were the actions, and acts of *attention*—the views, the things that they paid attention to and how they paid attention—were the things that determined the rise and fall. Could there be intentions and acts of attention that could bring all of this to an end?

So he extracted the pattern, extracted the lesson, and let all his other memories go so that he could focus in on the present moment, remembering just enough about intention and attention to see how to take apart this process of constant fabrication in the present moment to find something unfabricated. He was able to extract a really useful meaning out of these memories, but then he had to put them aside.

What's a little disturbing for a lot of us is that once he arrived at total awakening and nibbana, there was no need for meanings anymore. There was no more for-the-sake-of anything. Everything up to that point was for the sake of this: total release. But once release is gained, it's not for the sake of anything. It has no meaning in and of itself. It's gone beyond meaning. For those of us who still live by meanings, it's unnerving to think about it. We keep thinking, "If I let go of

the personal meanings I get from things or my sense of importance in the world, what do I have left?” When people have attained nibbana, they no longer have any need for being important in the world—and it’s hard for us to think about that.

It’s good that awakening comes in stages. With stream entry, you don’t totally let go of your sense of self. There’s still that lingering sense of “I am,” as Ven. Khemaka said, that hovers around the aggregates, lingers around the aggregates. But the fact that you have seen the deathless helps you to realize that this lingering sense of “I am” is something you actually want to let go of in the future. You won’t be willing to let go of this until you’ve seen that there really is something better. That’s what stream entry gives you: enough of a taste of the deathless to say, yes, this really is better. That’s what confirms your realization: Total release really would be a good thing. Otherwise, it sounds chilling: no more meaning, no more importance, no more memories. That’s because there’s something better. Always keep that in mind.

We look at the Buddha after his awakening. He still had his memories, his memories of previous lifetimes, his memories even of this lifetime. He would call on them every now and then to teach a Dhamma lesson. As long as he could see that they would have meaning for someone else, he would engage in them. But as for his own needs, he didn’t need them anymore.

There was that time near his total passing away when Ven. Ananda came to him and said, “Please don’t enter into total nibbana in this little tiny dusty town. Go to one of the great cities. There are a lot of people there with faith; they’ll take care of your funeral.” And the Buddha replied, “Don’t call this a little dusty town. This used to be the capital of a wheel-turning monarch.” He himself had been the wheel-turning monarch at that time. He talked about how great the city was but now it was all gone. Another Dhamma lesson.

As for his own importance, shortly before he did pass into total nibbana, he said to the monks, “As for the minor training rules, as the Sangha sees fit they can do away with any of them that they want to do away with.” This statement means a lot of different things, but one of them is that, if you think about it, the Vinaya was one of the Buddha’s main accomplishments. The Dhamma, as he said, was something that he had discovered, but the Vinaya was something he had formulated. And here he was handing it over to the monks. He was no longer laying claim to one of his main accomplishments.

In one way, this was basically a challenge to them. He had told them many, many times that if they really cared about the long life of the teaching, they wouldn't undo any of the rules at all. What his statement toward the end of his life meant was that whether the teaching was going to continue was totally up to them. They would show their loyalty not by simply saying, "The Buddha said we had to hold by the rules," but by saying, "We chose to hold by the rules." As for the Buddha himself, this was a gesture of saying: no more need to be important in the world. No more need to be meaningful in the world. He was going to go for total peace.

So those are some of the memories that the Buddha would let go of for something much better. Think about that when you find yourself getting engaged in other old memories. How do your memories compare to the Buddha's? Are they really worth holding on to so that you can squeeze out that last little bit of meaning, that last little bit of importance? See them as opportunities to learn lessons—Dhamma lessons. Take the lesson and let everything else go.

When you think in those terms, your faculty of memory becomes an aid in the practice and not a hindrance. It becomes part of right view and right mindfulness. But it does require putting aside the particularity of your memories: "This happened at that time, you said this, you said that, they said this, they said that." Those are scraps. Don't let yourself feed off scraps when there are so many better things to feed on: things that, when you feed on them, can take you to a point where you no longer need to feed.