

Meaning Through Perfections

November 21, 2021

When we sit here with our eyes closed, we can think about our lives: where they're coming from, where they're going. When we do, it's good to think about the knowledge the Buddha gained on the night of his awakening. In the first knowledge he saw that he hadn't just lived one life. He had had many, many lives. But they went up and down, and up and down, and down again, and up again.

He said it was like throwing a stick in the air: Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end, sometimes it lands splat in the middle. There doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to all the ups and downs.

So, he went on to his second knowledge: his knowledge of *all* beings in the universe as they died and were reborn. Here he began to see a pattern: People were reborn in line with their actions. Good actions had a tendency to lead to good rebirths, bad ones to bad rebirths. But even then, beings were going up and down, up and down. They would go to the highest levels of heaven and then would still fall because they'd get heedless.

It didn't seem to be going anywhere. It had no meaning, just lots and lots of suffering interspaced with some respite, but then more suffering again. He began to think: What would be a meaningful life in this context? And he came to the conclusion that the only life with any meaning would be one that wants to get out.

The way out was what he found in the third knowledge: He saw, by understanding how the mind creates suffering for itself out of its own intentions, how it can *change* its intentions so that it can develop a path that leads to the end of suffering, reaching the highest happiness possible. That's what gives meaning to life.

So, the question is: What is that path? The path he found on the night of his awakening was the noble eightfold path. But it builds on the development of qualities of the mind that are called *perfections*. These are the qualities that the Buddha in his previous lifetimes had been developing, and it was in dependence on these that he was able to practice in such a way as to gain his awakening. These are qualities that all of us have in a potential form, all of us can develop them, so we can find a way of giving meaning to our lives as well.

For this reason, you want to look at your daily life—both on the cushion and off the cushion—as an opportunity to develop those perfections. Like right now as you're meditating, you're developing the perfection of *renunciation*.

Renunciation doesn't mean that you simply run away from sensual pleasures; you

try to find happiness in a way that doesn't involve sensuality. You do that by focusing on the body as you sense it from within—the body in and of itself, as the Buddha says: focusing on the breath as you feel it; breathing in a way that gives rise to a sense of well-being. This is a pleasure that's not sensual. It's the pleasure of form. And it doesn't have the drawbacks of sensuality.

This is one way you can develop perfections: simply by finding your happiness here. As you go through the day, you can look for other opportunities. Dealing with other people, you have to develop a lot of goodwill and equanimity—those are perfections. As you're meeting up with challenges, you have to develop the perfection of determination, the perfections of persistence and endurance, the perfection of truthfulness.

Every way in which you develop good qualities like this, you're taking one more step toward awakening. The important thing, though, is that you're guided by discernment. After all, when you look at the perfections, you can see that all of them except one are pretty basic to all human cultures. Everybody recognizes that they're good: Everybody recognizes that generosity is good, virtue is good, goodwill is good, truthfulness is good.

What makes the Buddha's perfections special is the one exception: the perfection of discernment, because it's the only teaching in which discernment is really all-around: to understand how things are originated in the mind; how they pass away; what their allure is; what their drawbacks are; and then the escape from them through dispassion. This discernment that understands how we can develop dispassion and find an escape—that's what makes the Buddha's discernment special.

You apply that discernment to all the other perfections to give them guidance, to make sure they keep heading in the right direction. For example, with the perfection of renunciation: Back when the Buddha was still a bodhisatta, a being searching for awakening, he heard people say that if you want to escape from sensuality you have to go out and basically torture yourself: go without food, go without breathing. So he tried that for six years, tormenting himself until he finally realized that that was not the way. That's one case where the discernment of that time was leading people astray.

The Buddha saw that the escape from sensuality doesn't lie in submitting yourself to pain, it lies in finding another source of pleasure—this pleasure of form, because this pleasure of form acts as nourishment for the mind and has none of the drawbacks of sensual pleasure. It doesn't make you intoxicated, and it certainly doesn't involve your having to take anything away from anyone else or

exposing yourself to the dangers that come when you try to lay claim to something out there in the world.

This is just one example of how discernment takes ordinary, everyday virtues and turns them into perfections.

So, as you're developing the perfections, as you're studying the perfections—trying to give rise to them in your life—always keep asking yourself, “What does discernment have to tell me about this perfection?” That way, the virtues you develop, as you try to develop goodness and happiness at the same time, really do have meaning, really do have a sense of direction—a direction that takes you all the way to awakening.

It is possible. We tend to say, “Well, we're just ordinary people. How can we ever gain awakening? Awakening belongs to the Buddha and the noble disciples.” Well, who were the Buddha and the noble disciples before they became Buddha and noble disciples? They were ordinary people, too. It's just that the meaninglessness of life as it's ordinarily lived became too oppressive for them. They said, “There's got to be a way out. There's got to be something better. There has to be meaning in what we're doing.” And they found it. In the course of developing the qualities that were needed, they changed their status from ordinary people to noble people.

And we can do the same. That's a point that we should always keep in mind.