

Dharmette: Understanding the Purpose of Practice

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on December 1, 2010

One of the important topics in Buddhist practice is understanding the purpose for which you're practicing. A sense of purpose, intention, or goal is very helpful, but it can also be a hindrance. Anybody who practices has to understand the nature of having a purpose, or a goal, and how to work with it – when to engage in it in an active way and use it as a reference, and when to drop it.

In some schools of Buddhism, the goal is to be goalless. So you can be goalless, and set that as an ideal. Then the practice is to try to find out how to be that way. And in the process of doing that, you might discover how many agendas you have – for fixing, making something happen, acquiring, becoming a better self – all kinds of things. Then you see all that against the reference point of no goal. And then you can slowly let go, let go, let go, until you come to what feels like a very content state of just being. Even the goal of being goalless can be a goal.

The advantage of having a goal is that then we know what we're supposed to do. It can be better or easier to know what to do than if you have a very amorphous idea that Buddhist practice or mindfulness is a good thing to do. You can be mindful of many things which are not particularly useful to be mindful of. You can be mindful of your little toe. You can go around all day being mindful of your little toe; that's nice, I suppose. But maybe it's not as useful as being mindful of your breathing, or of your beliefs, or of your clinging, or of your resistance to things. Certain things are more useful to pay attention to than others.

How do you know what is useful? You know a little bit by the purpose you're interested in. If you're interested in freedom from suffering, freedom from clinging, then it's more useful to pay attention to your clinging than it is to pay attention to your little toe, perhaps. And maybe it gives you a little guidance: "Pay attention to this." Or maybe what you need to understand is that it's useful to pay attention to your belief systems, because your belief systems – often subconsciously in the background – are fueling your clinging and attachment. Since what you're interested in is not clinging, then, rather than being mindful of the trees, and the ocean, and nature – which is a beautiful thing to do – but it's not as productive as looking directly at the beliefs and the clinging you have. If it's a vague idea of being mindful, it can be valuable, but it might not be as beneficial as having a certain goal

or purpose in mind.

There are a lot of purposes you can have, a lot of wonderful things to be engaged in. Some of them are intermediate purposes. For example, you might feel that you're not kind enough as you are going about your daily life, and it would be useful to become a kinder person. So that becomes your goal: "Let me see if I can approach people with more kindness. It's not in my nature to do that, but let me see. What would it take to do it with some integrity?" Maybe it just means that I slow down a little bit, and take in the other person more fully, so that I really register who they are and what's going on with them. Maybe it will be easier to approach them kindly if I really get a sense of who they are, rather than just coming from my ideas of what should be. It's possible to work on your kindness, and develop it. You don't have to be stuck with your native, or preexisting, level of kindness. You can cultivate and strengthen that capacity, and that can be a purpose or goal that you set for yourself.

You can cultivate greater concentration. You might find that your mind keeps getting caught up very easily in its preoccupations, concerns, and worries. And you have a sense that you want to do something. But your mind gets pulled away, this way and that way, and you can't really stay focused on anything. So a good purpose would be to cultivate concentration. And since you know

that's your purpose, then you can look at what supports concentration. What can I do that develops that in some way? Maybe this is not the time to focus on kindness; maybe this is the time to focus on being still. Or maybe it would be better not to spend a lot of time on the computer, or television, or the radio, or email – all these things that tend to spin out my mind. If I want to develop concentration, maybe I need to live in a more settled or focused way, and not be jumping around doing all the things that I could do.

If you have a sense of a purpose, that purpose casts light. It helps you make decisions about things you want to do: how to practice, what to focus on, and to do things that support that sense of purpose. If you don't have a sense of purpose, then you're more adrift. I think that the way mindfulness practice is taught here in the West is sometimes not taught with enough sense of purpose. It's just taught as if mindfulness is all good, and all you have to do is be mindful, and everything else will follow.

It is possible to take to heart in the wrong way what I said earlier about how profound it can be to pay attention to the nature of mindfulness itself: that there's some freedom, a timeless presence, just in the qualities of attention itself. That kind of message can also turn a person away from a sense of purpose, because it's about just resting in this luminous awareness, as

opposed to having some place you're going and developing.

It's important to have some sense of understanding about what you're doing and why you're doing it. Sometimes when you see a teacher, one of the very interesting conversations is to make clear what I'm doing, and why I'm doing it. This is why I'm doing the practice; this is my direction of where I'm going; this is what I'm trying to develop; this is what I'm working on right now. Then you can have a very interesting conversation about that, maybe in some deeper way.

Sometimes the purpose, the goal, is not very clear to people. Sometimes there's an intuitive sense of why they're doing it, but they can't articulate a particular purpose. I think that's fine. I spent some years that way myself. Nothing was more important for me than to practice, but I didn't have any clear sense of why. I just intuitively knew that this is what I was doing. Other times, I had a very clear sense of purpose: this is what I was doing.

I remember once, I went to sit a three month retreat at IMS. At the beginning of the retreat, Joseph Goldstein asked me, "Why are you here?" [laughs] And I said, "To overcome my suffering." At the moment, that was a very sincere answer, but after I left that conversation, I thought, "Oh. Was that profound enough [laughs] – a

simple thing like that?” I’ve since learned that that’s a profound purpose. But, I thought, “Maybe I was supposed to have a more lofty goal.”

It’s important to know when to drop that sense of purpose. It’s possible to set a direction for the ship. Then once the direction is set, you don’t think about the direction anymore. For example, when you sit down to meditate, you might have a sense of purpose: of why you’re sitting there, why you’re practicing. But then you don’t want to think about that purpose anymore once you’re there, because that just keeps you a bit too agitated, too involved, and maybe you want to let go. Any thought about the purpose just gets in the way of being really present. So you have to know how to drop it as well.

One of the dangers with a sense of purpose is that people can spend too much time trying to fix everything, and tinker with everything. There can be a lot of expectation around the purpose. People can want to measure themselves: I’m not living up to the goal; I’m not doing well enough; I’m not going fast enough. There can be a lot of ego connected to it: me, myself and mine. It’s my goal. How are other people seeing me? I’m not living up to it. It’s all about me, around the goal, and that can get in the way.

There are many problems with a sense of a goal. But

having a goal, or a sense of purpose, or an intention can also be very enlivening and deepening. It can be a reference point, which helps us understand what's going on, and what's useful.

Some goals can be particular, short-term goals. Some can be lifetime goals that we establish for ourselves. There can be a goal for a particular week. This week let me be as mindful as I can when I'm driving. Then you explore that, and see what that's like, trying to organize your driving so you can really be mindful. Or it can be a week where you are mindful around food. This is a valuable place to bring mindfulness to. You can try to organize your week so that you have some more care and attention given to what happens when you're around food, and you're eating. That's where you cultivate and develop. It's a small sense of purpose.

Or there can be a lifetime purpose of trying to come from a place of compassion. Engaging with the world in a compassionate way is a high priority for you, and for how you want to organize and orient your life. So then you set that, and then you start looking with that purpose. What supports that? What manifests that? What allows me to live that? There are many things I can do in this life, but if that's really important for me, how do I organize myself around that?

There are often subconscious intentions that we have,

but we don't see. However, when you articulate an intention, a purpose, or a goal for yourself, that gives you a chance to find out that maybe that goal wasn't worthwhile [laughs]. Maybe it wasn't a good one after all; or maybe you were holding it in the wrong way.

Sometimes the difficulties or the problems around having a goal are the very place where we learn and grow. Some people are afraid of having a goal, because they've gotten burned before. But rather than avoiding it, maybe go into it again, and then try to understand, "How did I hold it wrong? What was off before? Is there a different way of doing it this time?"

So spend some time considering goals. Is there a goal? Is there a sense of purpose that you might have? Is there a time and place for a goal? Is there a time and place for being goalless? Is there a time and place for reflecting and seeing? Is there some subconscious sense of purpose and intention, something you're trying to accomplish and do that you haven't articulated to yourself, and that maybe is useful or maybe not useful?

It's a very interesting area to explore, and I'd encourage you to spend some time considering your relationship to goals and purposes and intention and see where that leads you.

That was my purpose for this fifteen minutes. I hope that

was helpful.