

Meaning (3 of 5) The Big Questions

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Gil Fronsdal

Here we are at the third talk in this five-part series on meaning. The meanings we have for ourselves, for our lives, can come to bear on our meditation. There is a connection. Sometimes the sense of meaning we have animates and activates our meditation, like the search for meaning, staying close to it. Sometimes it agitates our meditation. Sometimes we get caught up in these topics of meaning. The important meanings we have can influence how we meditate and why we meditate.

So to begin looking at the meaning-making aspects of the mind – the meaning-making aspects of how we live our lives – is important all around. But it's also important to clarify what we are doing in meditation, what meditation is about for us so that we can have a little more wholehearted engagement – we know why we are doing something. Sometimes the meanings we assign to meditation or connect to it are not helpful. They actually get in the way of the depth and full potential of meditation.

This idea of meaning is sometimes connected to the big questions of life that people may be strongly motivated to find, live by, or establish for themselves. There are big questions like, what is the meaning of life? Or what is the meaning of my life that I want to have? There are big questions about death. What happens when we die? What happens to us after we die? People are trying to understand that issue, and that can affect their relationship with meditation. Meditation, for some people, is a strategy for dealing with death. For some people, it's understood that mindfulness meditation is one of the best preparations for dying and so wanting to die well, die freely, not die with difficulty.

For some people, meditation is not about dying well but about being reborn well or not being reborn in the future. There is a strong momentum or approach in Buddhism about practicing in order to become free of rebirth. So that is important for what some people do. That informs and animates their dedication to meditation.

Some people mistrust meaning-making and don't see a need for it. For them, meditation is not about the big questions of life; meditation has to do with the simplicity of the moment, just living this moment in a nice way. But that is also connected to meaning. Somehow the idea of just living fully in this moment in a simple, clear, free way – that is meaningful and important, that is a

valuable way of living this precious life that we have.

So what interpretation, what understanding do we have about what this life is about? These are things to reflect on. They reflect what is most important for us. Really spending time with that and looking at it, we can ask the question, how does my meditation support what's most important for me?

If meditation doesn't support what is most important for you, maybe you shouldn't meditate. Maybe there are better things to do. Maybe do things that actually support what is most important. But if meditation does support what is most important for you, maybe that can provide more motivation to meditate. You see the connection, and it encourages you to be more fully involved with it all.

To realize, maybe consciously or unconsciously, we may have big existential questions we live by, it's possible to investigate that more deeply. Turn the attention around 180 degrees to really look deep inside. These existential beliefs, these ideas – what fuels them? What do they arise out of? What is the source for them inside of ourselves? Rather than accepting them as a given, not questioning the philosophy or the beliefs that are there necessarily, but questioning maybe or looking deeply, what is motivating that? What animates them? What is the fuel for thinking this way or being this

way?

I'll give you some examples of what I mean by that. Some people may ask a big question like, what is the meaning of life? I might answer, what is the emotion that is fueling that question? Some people may say that it is fear: fear of missing out, fear of not doing it right, fear of failing this life, fear of not understanding what's the purpose of life. If fear is motivating it, then the practice of mindfulness is to turn the attention around to attend to the fear before we attend to the big questions. Really go deeply into it and be present until that fear dissolves. And when the fear dissolves, then what has happened to those questions? If those big questions are no longer fueled by fear, what happens to them? Does our relationship with them change? The beliefs might still be there, but if they don't have the strength that comes with the power of fear, what happens to them then? The same thing with death. Concerns with death might have to do with fear and so to look at the fear deeply.

Sometimes what fuels those things is conceit. Somehow it's about me and myself: "I have to prove myself. I have to do what's right. I have to account for myself. I have to show that I'm a good person. I have to prove something." So the big existential questions are very tightly connected to ideas of identity, of conceit, of attachments to self. Right now, I'm using all of these in the context of how they involve attachment. So we

investigate that; we bring our attention to that.

This idea is to turn around 180 degrees and look deeper and deeper, rather than letting the big questions of life, the big existential conclusions and ideas of life, hover there in our life as if they're like a fixed thing to stay with and live by. Mindfulness meditation involves looking deeper and deeper. What animates it? What is the source inside where these kinds of beliefs and understandings come from? What fuels them?

It's a paradigm shift, in a sense, from being concerned with something we can be aware of, we can think about, we can believe about, to something that's *deeper* than what we think about, what we believe, or that kind of focus. We are turning around and asking, what is it like to believe, search, and hold on to these ideas that have to be this way?

So these big existential questions, in this mindfulness tradition, are important to see. The big existential conclusions we've come to – they're important to see. But then, look more deeply. What is going on under the surface? What is the source for them inside? What are the feelings, the emotions, the fears, the conceits? And how does that connect to meditation? It turns out that those existential questions, those big answers we have to the big questions of life, more often than not, will interfere with the full potential of meditation being a

releasing of all attachments.

When all our attachments have been released, what happens to our relationship to those big existential questions, those big answers that we might be trying to live by or are living by? They don't necessarily go away. The answers might still be relevant to us. But it's kind of a whole different world to live in with them if we've been able to take meditation all the way to its potential, to a full release.

So what is your relationship to the big questions of life – questions of meaning, of life and death, of what's most ultimate, of God, of heaven, of rebirth, of purpose? Do you have something that you believe is ultimate? Or are you searching for that? Whatever that is, respect it deeply. But then turn the attention around and look more deeply at what is underneath that. What is fueling it? What is animating those beliefs? See what you find out. See if that might help you to become quieter, stiller, more at ease, more centered here and now in that place where there can be no attachments.

Thank you very much, and we'll continue this idea of meaning tomorrow.