

# Meaning (4 of 5) Values We Live By

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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The topic this week has to do with the meaning that meditation has for us. I know some people like myself at one point were a little bit allergic to the idea of meaning. But as I've come to understand the word "meaning," it's a really broad word. It covers a lot of ways in which we assign purpose, roles, functions, and value to the events of our lives – how we understand or interpret them in the context of our life story, our society, and our beliefs. There's no shortage of the many ways in which we assign some interpretation to the meditation we're doing. So this week we're trying to bring some of that out and have you be more reflective in a way that would help your meditation. To help you not get caught up in assigned meanings that are not useful for you, but also to recognize the useful ones that support, give buoyancy, momentum, and strength to meditation, that help you stay focused on what you're doing.

Today, the topic is the values that we live by and the role, the connection, that meditation might have with those values. It's hard to imagine that there are people who have no values at all, no ethical values, no sense of prioritizing certain attitudes for how to be in the world. Some values might be healthy and supportive of self and others, and some might be harmful for self and others. But how does meditation fit into it?

It would be unfortunate for a thief, who feels it's fine to steal, to assign value or importance to meditation because it centers and calms them so that they can do their profession effectively. That would be quite sad because of the harm that does. Someone who is a caregiver wants to give the best care to people in a medical setting. For them, meditation also may have the value of grounding and centering them, preparing them so that their best can be present, with wisdom and clarity, for caring for the people in their care. So the values we have and how we want to live are brought to bear on meditation, and meditation is used to serve that purpose.

One thing that inspires me is people who want to live honestly, to live without any lies or deceit, to have truth be at the forefront. With that as a value, mindfulness can be a support for that. Mindfulness is a truth-telling practice. It's a way of connecting to what's true, finding what's true. So the assigned function, the assigned

meaning, the interpretation of what meditation is, is that it's truth-making.

For someone else, the value could be harmlessness, and so the function, meaning, purpose of meditation is to live a more harmless life. Or the value may be enlightenment – full, complete, total enlightenment. So for them, the value, purpose, function assigned to meditation is that it is going to support them to find a way to that enlightenment.

There can be multiple functions happening at the same time. The same meditation can be done for different purposes. It can be for truth-telling, for de-stressing, for coming with more groundedness to the work we do, for being on a path to awakening. It's not like you're choosing one over the other, but to have some clarity about what's important, maybe what's most important around the values we have. Maybe even picking and choosing between the things that are important for us, so we can emphasize doing one thing well.

If we have too many values, too many purposes, everything gets watered down. Nothing really takes root and flowers. Sometimes in order to really do well, we have to kind of choose *this* is what meditation is about – this is what I'm developing and doing here, and have some clarity with it. The benefit of this is that no matter what the purpose is, as meditation deepens, that sense

of getting behind it and having some dedication to it kind of blossoms out into all these different dimensions of our life. So you might put aside certain things as the purpose, the value, and later you'll find that if it's a healthy purpose, it returns in a whole different way.

This may be like someone who moves to a foreign country, where a different language is spoken, and wants to be friends with everyone on the street. They go around trying to make friends but cannot speak their language. So they dedicate themselves to learning the language. And once it's learned, they find that walking down the street, it's easy now to make connections with people because of the shared language. So regardless of the purpose of meditation, learning to meditate well opens up in such a wonderful way to so many different things.

So what are the values we live by? Some people center their life on the values they have more than the goals they have, the work they do, what they're trying to do in their life. And for some people, how they live is more important than what they do. In Buddhist practice, I think that we emphasize the how much more than the what.

Whatever the purpose is for meditation, the way to it is by caring really carefully for how we are – that we're not living a harmful way; that we're doing what's beneficial; that we're learning to be at peace, relaxed, and

non-attached; learning to be kind and supportive; learning that we have care for what we do; learning to be honest in all ways; learning to let go. So many different things so that we can be at ease, have equanimity, and be at peace here and now.

For some people, the value they live by is to be of service, to live a life of generosity and support. So meditation serves that purpose for them. They want to live a life of really practicing dharma for its own sake. And with that, they want to live a life of service.

All these things shift and change. In fact, over a lifetime of practice, it's fascinating to see what the interface is between meditation and the way we live our lives, the purpose and values we have, what we emphasize as being important, the assigning of meaning to meditation and to our life and back and forth. It shifts and changes dynamically. To hold on to any one purpose or meaning for what meditation is, sooner or later, we'll get all bottled up, get kind of limited, and come to a dead end. But rather, to keep opening up, keep kind of looking, feeling, and sensing all the different functions, meanings, and purposes that evolve over the years of practicing more and more. It's dynamic stuff that happens.

It's like having a good friend, and over the years, the friendship shifts and changes as the two of you change.

Somehow you stay connected and involved, and things flow back and forth and change and unfold. But because of the commitment to stay present and connected, you both change together.

So the same thing with meditation. To understand some of the values that we live by and come to bear on meditation, and then see how they shift and change. One way our values change is we discover through meditation that some of the values, some of the assigned purposes, some of the attitudes we have about meditation don't work – that they're actually harmful for us. Straining in meditation, being attached to states of mind that we're going to attain, holding on to calm or bliss that might be there. These ways of holding on and wanting and overvaluing particular states of mind are kind of a dead end. They're really not that helpful.

So if a value is it's all about attaining a state, having some wonderful experience that I can add to my repertoire of wonderful experiences – that's kind of a dead end for experiencing the full potential of what meditation can be about.

If there's a lot of conceit involved in meditation, the assigned meaning might be: "I'm going to be the best meditator on my block and everyone will like me. There will be accolades of how wonderful I am because I'm

such a wonderful meditator.” Or, “If I meditate well, my meditation teacher will praise me, and I will be happy ever after.” So those kinds of assigning of meaning, assigning a purpose, assigning a function are dead ends. And you will end up kind of knocking your head against that dead end until you go find a different way.

So look deeply, what is the meaning of meditation? What's its function? What's its purpose for you? Here's an exercise I'd recommend you do over the next 24 hours. On paper or with a computer, write the words “For me, meditation means,” and fill in the rest of the sentence, and do that a hundred times. Every time, write something different. Many years ago, maybe I would have written down that meditation means nothing. I might have dismissed the whole exercise. But then, because it's a hundred different times, you have to kind of keep going.

It might be meditation means that I sit on my cushion. Meditation means that I sit early in the morning. You can say physical things like that, but does that really get to your heart? Does it really get to some deeper thing? And keep writing, keep writing a hundred times, “For me, meditation means.” After a while, you can drop the “for me” part. But that's the idea. See what you discover. And stretch yourself. It doesn't have to be all at once, sitting to do all hundred, but maybe over 24 hours you can write down a hundred. Fill in that sentence a

hundred times.

I hope that the exercise is enjoyable and useful for you.  
Thank you.