

Meaning (1 of 5) Suffering

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I want to spend this week exploring the topic of meaning in relation to meditation. What is the meaning of meditation? I think in years past I would have been very hesitant to take up that topic. Coming out of Zen training, the idea of assigning meaning or finding meaning was often presented as being beside the point. There was something very significant about just showing up and being present, without inserting meaning on top of our experience.

I love this idea that there is a radical simplicity – so much falls away. But, in our human lives, human minds, I think we cannot get away, consciously or unconsciously, from being involved in questions of meaning and purpose. Why are we here? What is most important for us to do?

Religions often provide a sense of meaning, purpose, and an interpretation of what is important, what our priorities are, what we do with suffering, what is the

meaning of suffering, what is the purpose in our lives in relationship to suffering.

I hope this week's topic will give a kind of depth to your involvement with meditation. I hope it lets your meditation be fueled, founded on, and supported by some of the deeper values and understandings you have – maybe ones that you're not conscious of – that give your meditation more motivation, strength, value, more gravitas in a sense. We will look at the connection and association that meditation can have to a variety of different things in our lives.

Today, I want to talk about suffering. I don't quite remember the sequence, but tomorrow, I will talk about the important values we have and the connection to values, the connection to ourselves, the connection to others, and the connection to what might be considered sacred. So what is the meaning of meditation in relation to those important areas of our lives?

When this vipassana mindfulness meditation that I'm teaching was brought to the United States, the teachers had a very strong wish to make it available to as many people as possible, without the hindrance that might be there if the whole Buddhist religious package was brought with it. There was an idea that mindfulness practice is a simple, raw, basic practice, which doesn't have to belong to any particular religion or philosophy

maybe. They wanted to make the practice broadly and widely available so it could benefit many people.

In fact, they succeeded in many ways because those first Buddhist teachers inspired generations now of people who offer mindfulness completely separated from Buddhism. This is sometimes called secular mindfulness in clinical settings and other places. Overall, I think it's been a wonderful contribution to society.

I think there is some real value in offering a kind of Buddhism light – where we don't pile in a lot of Buddhist meaning, Buddhist sense of purpose, and the Buddhist religiosity that surrounds it – and just make it easily accessible to people. That is still the case, but what I'm hoping is that this discussion will prompt you not to feel like you have to adopt or adapt to some Buddhist idea that might come through here. Instead, I hope that the teachings become a mirror for you to reflect and think more deeply, maybe more deeply than you ever have, about the place of meaning in your life. What meanings do you bring, what purposes do you bring, what is your understanding of what it means to be a human being in this world?

Perhaps, this can be an example of the value that can be found. You or someone might go to the doctor, and the doctor says: “You're about to have a heart attack.

You're living with so much stress that I think you need to learn meditation. Mindfulness is very helpful. There's a mindfulness center nearby. Why don't you go there and learn to meditate. With all your stress, I don't think you're going to live more than a couple of months."

So that motivates you, and you go to a meditation center and learn mindfulness. The teacher asks: "Why are you here? What is the meaning or the purpose for you being here?" You might say, "Well, my doctor sent me."

Then the teacher asks, "Why did the doctor send you?" You say: "The doctor said that if I don't do it, I'll die. I don't want to die." So the meaning of meditation, for you, is not dying.

So the teacher asks another question: "Why do you want to live?" You say: "Oh, I want to be able to see my grandchildren grow up. I want to be able to finish the work that I do. I love life and want to be able to live it fully. I'm afraid of death; I'm trying to put it off as much as I can. I feel like I haven't dealt with the big issues in my life. Before I die, I want to finish and deal with those issues." So that idea of the doctor recommending meditation because, otherwise, you'll die begins being connected to other values, other important ideas about why you should stay alive. And those are animating forces. They are reasons for your life.

Some people don't know why they're alive. They don't have a meaning or purpose. Some people have discovered that they can live much more peacefully if they aren't searching, questioning, or getting all wrapped up around issues of meaning and purpose. They are happy just to roll along with whatever is happening. Then that becomes the meaning, that becomes the purpose: to just roll along, be present. Meaning is a hindrance, and it's nicer just to roll along with things.

So what is the meaning we have? What is the purpose? What is the interpretation we have? It might be interesting for some of you to know the classic or standard Theravadan Buddhism that this tradition comes out of. I consider myself a Theravadan Buddhist in my role of teaching, but I don't really have much place in my heart or mind for some of the core teachings that give meaning and purpose to Theravadan Buddhism. Some people will say that is the foundation of it. Some people say that without believing in it, there's no Buddhism even. But I take exception with that. My sense of meaning is very Buddhistic. I have some kind of ultimate sense of meaning and purpose that comes from this practice. But I don't share some of the core things that some of the tradition has.

An example would be that I'm not motivated by the idea that the purpose of this practice is so that we will no longer get reborn. That doesn't speak to me. That doesn't inspire me. That doesn't have a place for me. It is completely appropriate and fine for someone else to have that view. I do not have an issue with that. It's just not what animates me. The purpose that I would no longer be reborn does not do much for me

Do I have something else that is comparable? If anything, I feel that to have radical freedom from suffering is enough for me. To really let go of suffering in some deep way and then live this life free of attachments and clinging – that is motivating for me. And in the background of that, there is a fundamental idea or sense (that I don't hold very tightly) of trusting life, of feeling at home in this universe. So this letting go of suffering, letting go of clinging, is also a homecoming into this universe, where I'm no longer standing in opposition to it or making some problem with it. Those are all ways of making meaning – of purpose, of contextualizing, of interpreting what we're doing.

One thing in which people find meaning or purpose is in relationship to suffering. Some people will inherit some meaning for suffering, the purpose of suffering, from the religion they grew up with. Some religions have the very important idea that suffering is redemptive, that you're supposed to suffer, it's good to experience suffering

because it prepares you for the hereafter. Some people say that suffering tests our religious faith, and so we have to somehow hold on to our faith when we suffer – that’s the key thing we have to do, and we’ll get rewarded if we hold on to our faith. There are all kinds of ideas people have.

In Buddhism, kind of the meaning of suffering is that it is unnecessary and that it is motivating in order to come to the other side of suffering – to be free of suffering, a radical liberation from suffering. There’s a famous quote from the Buddha where he says, “I teach suffering and the end of suffering.” Why end suffering? You might say that there is no need to ask why. Just like you take your hand off a hot stove, you don’t have to ask why you do it. Your body will do it immediately. So it could be that simple, like almost a biological imperative to be free of suffering.

But there might be other ideas. “Yes, I want to be free of suffering so I can better support the world around me.” “I want to be free of my clinging so that I can act from a place of compassion and care for this world, take care of my family.” “I want to become free of the sources – greed, hate, and delusion – that bring about suffering so that I can live a certain way, be a certain way, or do this and that.”

So what is your meaning? In terms of your meditation practice, what is the purpose, role, and meaning of suffering? How does suffering fit into your meditation practice? How does that fit into the wider, deeper circles of meaning in your life? Is it simply to be free of suffering and that's enough? Or does suffering serve some deeper purpose, a deeper value?

Is it just to be free of stress so you don't have a heart attack? Or, if you're free of suffering, what do you hope that will do for you? What is your aspiration, what is your sense of purpose, if you can become radically free of suffering? Or is freedom from suffering, coping with suffering, kind of a sideshow that you do reluctantly so you can get on to what's most important?

What is most important? What is the most important way that you understand your life, what your life's about, what it means to be a human being? What is suffering and freedom from suffering – how does that fit into your life?

I hope that this makes some sense to you. I'm hoping this is a catalyst for you to do some reflection. I would encourage you to engage friends, family, strangers in this topic of meaning and purpose. What is the most fundamental meaning and purpose that you have, that you live by, and how does meditation connect to that?

Thank you, and we'll continue these reflections this week.