

Meaning (5 of 5) Sacred

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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This is the last talk on the theme of meaning in connection to meditation practice. The meaning is the assigning of value, purpose, and interpretations to our meditation practice, to Buddhist practice. There are many different purposes and values that we assign it. For example, you might have an illness. The doctor says you need to find a way to have less stress in your life and so advises that you meditate. So the assigned meaning and purpose of meditation is that it's for de-stressing. The primary interpretation, the understanding of what meditation is for, is a form of de-stressing.

Someone might find that they are struggling at work because they have to regularly give talks to a large group of people at work. They are afraid, and they're stumbling over their words. It's very hard for them to do it. They think that they need to find a way to calm down and work with their fear. Someone suggests that they try

mindfulness meditation to calm down, but also to get a handle on what's going on there for them – to work through the fear or learn to hold fear differently and not get hooked into it. So the assigned meaning, purpose, and value of meditation is to help them work with their fear.

Someone might feel in some unclear way that they have been suffering much of their life. There's been a sense of heaviness, despair, or strain that they live with. Even when they go on vacation, there's something not quite right. There's dissatisfaction. Then they hear some Buddhist teaching. A classic example, for some people, is they hear the teachings of the Four Noble Truths. They say: "Wow, no one's ever talked so front and center that there is suffering in this world. Everyone I've talked to before tries to get away from it or said it's not really there. They tried to paint a nice picture of how wonderful this world is. And I just see suffering everywhere. These teachings say that there is suffering, but they didn't stop there. They said there was a cause and a possibility of freedom from that suffering. And they have a path. They have a practice for doing that." This excited and buoyed them, "Yes, this is what I want to do." It motivated them. So the assigned meaning, purpose, and value of meditation has to do with some of the deeper existential issues of being a human being.

Some people practice meditation or do other things that

somehow open the mind dramatically, releasing them from ordinary states of being in the world, where “me versus you” is so strong, where we have to kind of chase after our thoughts or have our thoughts chase after us, where there is a very strong sense of alienation from everything – all kinds of ways people live. They spend time in nature, spend time with a lover, take a psychedelic, meditate. And in deeper and deeper meditation, they might get released from much of the holding patterns, tightness, and constrictions of their mind, their clinging, their wanting, their fear. They start having a taste, a feeling, an experience of what it’s like to not have any of those present, to be able to breathe easily, to feel a sense of freedom, to feel a sense of intimacy with the world. This is a very different relatedness to the world and to other people that feels so much more meaningful than anything else.

Perhaps, it is meaningful because the alternative way of being hurts or is challenging and stressful. It feels really good, healthy, and natural to not be caught up in our fears, desires, greed, and conceits. “Wow, this is health; this is psychological, spiritual health.”

For some people, it’s not just psychological. It feels so pervasive throughout their life, pervasive throughout their consciousness, in how they touch the world, see the world, or perceive everything. To call it psychological seems to limit it to something kind of bounded or small.

It is big; it is everything. So the assigned meaning of meditation is that it's a way of living from that place or being connected to it or finding it or practicing in a way that is attuned to something more than psychological well-being and health, but some kind of spiritual or broad, existential way of being.

So there are all these different levels, layers, or ways of assigning meaning, purpose, and value to meditation. None of them are wrong. They're all wonderful. It's important for each person to find what it is for them, so they can engage well with that. Each of us has different ways of practicing, different orientations, and different focuses for what mindfulness practice can be.

The topic today is the way in which the meaning of meditation, the assigned value of it, or the association we have with it can be what some people might call sacred. What is most sacred? This is, of course, a big word that some Buddhists don't care for. I don't think there's any obvious Pali word for the English "sacred," except maybe if we want to use the word Dharma. Or sometimes the word "noble" is kind of used that way.

I like the word sacred because it's not so clear what exactly it means. But it has to do with our ultimate value: what we see, understand, and orient ourselves to that touches all aspects of our life. It's kind of the heart, the source, and the context for how we want to live our life,

what defines our life. It is all-inclusive.

My favorite definition of what is sacred in our Buddhist practice is an awareness that leaves nothing out. As soon as there's a selection process that says, "No, that I'm not going to be aware of; that I'm going to exclude; that is not acceptable for me to bring attention to, this open, clear mindfulness to," then we're shut off from the sacred.

What is most sacred is when the awareness is all-encompassing. It doesn't mean we agree with or condone everything, but the awareness can hold it all. We trust that awareness. And within that wide universe of awareness that we float in, that we live in, that we trust – we find our way with wisdom, with whatever is going on. If we have to say no to something, we say no, but it's all held.

Other people may have their own ideas of what is sacred, or if sacred is not the right word, is ultimate. What has ultimate value for you? Or what are you committed to, to put at the center of your life? Some people put their family at the center, and with family, there is love, connection, a sense of responsibility, or devotion. Some people put, of course, work at the center. Some people put being of service to others as what has ultimate value. Some people with a theistic orientation put a connection to God at the center.

But in Dharma practice, at some point, what can become central for some people is the Dharma itself, the practice itself. At that point, it is so ultimate, so at the center, what gives the most meaning, the most value, the most purpose to our lives that that's where we want to have our life come from and be supported by. Everything has to be connected to this Dharma. One of the reasons for that is we've learned that anything other than that, of what we understand to be the Dharma, anything other than non-clinging that involves clinging is less healthy, less satisfying, and less meaningful. It just hurts.

So at some point, meditation becomes not something that we have to do and add to our life, it becomes our life. There's a wonderful transition or switch that can happen. The question "How do I bring my life into my practice?" (which I think is a beautiful question) changes to "How do I bring my life into my practice?" Now the practice takes center stage; the practice is the stage. The question is "How do I bring the audience, the visitors, everything up on the stage to be included there?" – rather than our ordinary life is the stage and the practice is one of the people in the audience who gets invited in to be part of the play.

So, to trust this – to have faith in it, to have confidence in it – is one of the possibilities with this topic of

meaning. The meaning is: “This is what I trust. This is what I have faith in. This is what I have confidence in. I have certainty that it is the right place, for me, to be the center, the focus, the root of my life.”

At that point, some people may feel: “Wait a minute, I’m being disloyal to my family. I have to love them. To have something else be more central seems like a betrayal.” This is my proposal: it doesn’t have to be a betrayal. The love you have for the world, your family, and other things that are important to you can remain just as important as they are now. There’s no diminishment of importance.

But more important is the Dharma, the practice of mindfulness, the awareness practice. That’s more central. Rather than diminishing the love, the care, the responsibility, the devotion towards the things that are important, we float in the Dharma, it holds us up, so those worthwhile things that we do, we can do them better. Dharma practice doesn’t diminish their importance. It makes them richer and more valuable, and we come to them as better people.

So it is safe to put the Dharma at the center of your life, more important than anything else because it’s the water that we float in. How wonderful it is to float in that water. Then you can be a lifeguard if need be. But if you haven’t learned to float, you’re not going to save a lot of

people. Thank you.