The Need for a Purpose

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There’s an interesting passage in the Canon where the Buddha talks about how we fashion the aggregates. The language is kind of strange, but the point is that we want to have aggregates and we fashion them for the sake of something. It doesn’t say what the sake is for, but that’s how we ordinarily engage in the present moment. We have a purpose, which means, of course, we have some expectations that by fashioning a sense of form, feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness, out of the raw material that’s given to us by our past karma, we’re looking for something. We have a purpose in mind. This is the nature of our mind. It’s purposeful. When it has no purpose, it’s miserable. This is why depression comes when people feel that no matter what efforts they make, they’re not worth it. All the avenues for happiness are closed off. There’s nothing they can do. That’s when they get depressed. And the only way out of that depression is to realize there are goals that are worthwhile. They may take a lot of effort, but long-term happiness is possible. This is why when the Buddha defines the question that lies at the basis of discernment, it’s not a question about acceptance or about oneness or about simply being in the present moment. It’s what, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and pain? There’s a duality there. You realize that your actions do make a difference. And long-term happiness is possible. We hear so much about inconstancy, impermanence, to the point where some people say, “Well, everything that happens is going to disappear right away, so why bother? Just learn how to accept and be okay with what’s happening.” But the Buddha never said that. Long-term happiness is possible. And it can be attained through our efforts. So wisdom lies in giving yourself a good goal, a good “for the sake of” that you’re going to be fabricating things for. It also gives you guidance on how to go in the right direction. This is what Right View is all about. Identifying what actions are skillful and then raising your sights from just skillful thoughts, words, and deeds to actions that can actually lead to a goal. That’s beyond long-term. Something that’s outside of space, outside of time, free from all limitations. That’s the one thing that doesn’t have a purpose. Nibbana itself doesn’t have to go anywhere. It doesn’t involve any fabrications. There’s no “for the sake of” anything else. Someone asked the Buddha one time, “What is virtue for?” Virtue is for the sake of developing concentration. “Well, what’s concentration for?” Concentration is for the sake of developing discernment. “What’s discernment for?” For the sake of release. “What’s release for?” For unbinding, total freedom. “What’s unbinding for?” The Buddha said, “No, stop there. Your question is going too far. You get to Nibbana, there’s no ‘for the sake of.’ So the message of the Buddha is extremely optimistic. There is a happiness that is so satisfying and so reliable that you don’t have to do anything more once you’ve got there. But to get there requires that you do have a sense that you’re doing this for a purpose. And the purpose is a good one. In some cases the motivation is focusing on the fact that you’re not there yet. That’s called renunciate pain. But renunciate pain has a hope. The expression in the Canon is,”There are those who have attained this goal, but I’m not one of them.” So it recognizes the fact that there is a goal that is attainable. The pain there is in the fact that you realize there’s work to be done. This is where you have to learn how to talk to yourself. That’s why the Buddha’s teachings are not just instructions, but also urging, encouraging, rousing you. He recommends that you develop a passion for the path. And you foresee that it will lead to something good. So we’re not just here to hang on to the present moment and think that the present moment is all the world has to offer. I mean, the present moment can be good for someone whose material status is pretty comfortable, social status is comfortable. And you look at Buddhist history and it tends to be times when there are people whose view of the world is that things are fine as far as they’re concerned. The interconnected web of causes and effects is working pretty well for them. So they’re the ones who tend to glory in the present moment. But what about people whose present moment is not that glorious? Years back I was going to be teaching in a Bipassana center in Paris. I was waiting outside my hotel for someone to come and pick me up. And I realized that since I’d come to France on that trip, there had always been someone around to translate for me. But here there was no one. And the thought went through my mind, “What if somebody comes up and asks me a question?” I could usually understand what people were saying in French, but I was really poor at speaking it. And sure enough, there were a group of telephone linemen across the street. And one of them caught my eye. And he came over. He said, “You’re Buddhist, right?” “Yes.” “Are Buddhists happy? Does Buddhism make you happy?” And I said, “Yes.” He said, “I’m miserable. I’ve got this horrible job. I’ve got horrible friends I can’t trust.” So I was able to cobble together a sentence. I said, “Well, look at our website. We’ve got some teachings in French.” And they went back to work. The people came, picked me up, took me to the Bipassana center. And the theme of my talk that night, I had already decided on, was the fact that the present moment is not the goal. The present moment is something that’s constructed. And we construct it for the sake of finding something that goes beyond the present moment. You know, just rest here in content. So I started the talk by telling them the story of the linemen. And I commented that if I had told him simply to accept the present moment, don’t have any expectations, learn how to be okay with where you are, he would have walked off. It wouldn’t have met his needs. But the whole point of the Buddhist teachings is it does meet our needs. We’ve been living a life where we’re not satisfied with the goals that we’ve been aiming at. He gives us a better set of goals and gives us instructions on how to get there and how to motivate ourselves to want to do it. As he says, you learn how to delight in the fact that there is a Dharma. Something that points out the way and affirms that you do have the power to make a difference. You learn how to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities and learn how to delight in developing skillful ones. And the word delight here, it’s good to understand. It means the way you talk to yourself about what you’re doing and about the goals that you have and the delight is that you’ve found that you’ve got some good goals and you’ve got some good ways of getting there. And so you talk to yourself to encourage yourself. Now we tend to delight in things that are not all that satisfactory. In fact, that’s the mind’s way of giving us encouragement, “Well, should he come? Keep on going.” The Buddha says, though, you can use that capacity for delight to help you on the path, to learn how to delight in solitude. When you’re alone, sometimes you’re feeling lonely, but your mind is soft and there’s all kinds of people in the world who could be really harassing you right now, bothering you right now, and you don’t have to deal with them. You’ve got time to look into your own mind, develop the qualities in the mind that are going to be helpful, and do really important work. The work of cleaning out your greed, aversion, and delusion is not a minor thing. And you’re not the only one who’s going to benefit. So you learn how to talk to yourself, to be happy that you’ve got this seclusion. When the mind is beginning to settle down and part of it says, “Well, you’re not doing much thinking right now, it’s not very intelligent,” learn how to talk to yourself then. Remind yourself this is an important skill. Learn how to keep the mind content as it gets quiet so that it can see itself clearly. The quiet is not an end in itself. Again, this is something you do for the sake of discernment. But do it well, and be happy that you have the opportunity to do it. The last two things the Buddha has you delighted are the fact that this is a path that, as he says, leads to the unafflicted. In other words, the path itself doesn’t cause any harm to anybody. And it leads to a goal that doesn’t cause any harm to anybody. You look at the way most people look for happiness in their lives, and it’s going to cause harm one way or another. And people learn how to turn a blind eye to that. But here you can look at this goal in a clear-eyed way, and it’s not harming anybody. The path there doesn’t harm anybody. So take delight in that. And then the final thing the Buddha has you delighted in is what he calls non-objectification. And again, it’s a name for the goal, one of the many names for the goal. It points out the fact that objectification means once you identify yourself as a person, as a being, beings need to feed. And when they feed, they tend to feed in areas where other people are trying to feed as well. Sometimes they even feed off of other beings, which inevitably leads to conflict. But here you are going to a goal that has none of that. No feeding, no conflict. It’s a good goal to be aiming at. So there are times when the Buddha would not say, “Well, just focus on the present moment,” but tells you to focus on why you’re focusing on the present moment. It leads to something beyond the present moment. First it leads to results that you will see now and on into the future, long-term wealth and happiness. And then something even beyond that, something outside of time entirely. So when things get dry, remind yourself you’re on a good path. It may have its fallow periods, but those are periods you can learn from. As you learn how to talk to yourself, learn how to take some delight in the fact that you’ve found the Dhamma, and it’s pointing you in a good direction. So learn how to keep yourself going in that direction. Your talking to yourself, your practice of virtue, concentration, discernment, is all for the sake of something really good. Because the mind functions for the sake of something. Feed on that. This will take you to a goal eventually where you don’t need to do anything at all for the sake of anything, and yet it’s the ultimate happiness. So one thing you can do when you really arrive and there’s nothing more to do, and you’re perfectly content, that there’s nothing more to do. The happiness is that superlative.

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