Meaning in a Meaningless Universe

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There are several times when the Buddha said that all he taught was suffering and the end of suffering. That time he was walking through the Simsapa forest, picked up a handful of leaves and asked the monks, “Which is greater, the leaves in his hand or the leaves in the forest?” They said, “Of course, the leaves in the forest are greater.” He said, in the same way, the things that he had known directly were like the leaves in the forest. The things he taught were the handful of leaves. It was just four things—suffering, its origination, its cessation, the path to its cessation. Sometimes people hearing these passages ask, “Why did he talk about rebirth? Why did he talk about the many levels of the cosmos? Why did he talk about the history of the cosmos?” There are two main reasons. One is that he shows all the different ways in which we can suffer. Death was simply the end. There wouldn’t be much we’d have to do. But it’s not the end. As long as there’s craving and clinging, the mind is going to keep on wanting to come back. It can come back to all kinds of places. The moment when you leave the body, you’re pretty desperate. You’re being pushed out. It’s like being evicted from a house. So you look and see whatever is available in the market, and you go to whatever seems likely. The range of likely things may not be all that wide or all that good. The other reason, though, is that you look at the Buddha’s description of the many cycles of the cosmos, and they don’t go anywhere. They evolve and then they devolve, and then they evolve again and devolve again. It becomes pretty obvious that this is a universe without a purpose. A lot of people find that thought chilling, but it’s directly related to the issue of suffering. If this universe had a purpose, and your suffering was part of the purpose of the universe, there’d be no way out. You’d have to continue suffering. But here, there’s no purpose. And so you’re free. If you want to put an end to suffering, the Buddha has found a way. There’s nobody to say no. This means that you’re free. No more rebirth. But again, look at what the options are. I was talking with an artist one time, and she was saying that she knew that someday her art was going to be destroyed. Of course, everything was going to blow up when the sun went nova. But she said, “Well, maybe I’ve rearranged a few atoms and it’ll be a little bit different in a nova.” Which seems a pretty depressing thought. If you look outside in the world for your meaning, it’s doing everything it can to say no, no, no. Then you look at the various levels of rebirth. We live in a world where people feed on other beings and other beings feed on other beings. And you wonder what kind of purpose that serves. You look at nature documentaries. I saw one a while back. These huge bats in Australia have no way of drinking water except for getting the fur of their chest wet. So every day they have to go down to a river and skim across the river to get the fur of their chest wet. Then they go back, sit on a branch and lick off the water. The problem is, the river is full of crocodiles. So every day, just to get a drink of water, the bats have to risk death. And you see their efforts to get away from the crocodiles. It’s pretty dismaying. Then you look at stars and planets forming and then blowing up. Where are you going to find them? Where are you going to find any meaning or purpose in this? There’s nothing there. What kind of accomplishments do you want to make? The things you work on can easily get snuffed out, which is why it makes all the sense in the world to look inside, to work on your own mind. Why is it that the mind wants to keep coming back? If this were all there was, we’d say, “Well, just put up with it.” But the Buddha says there’s more, there’s better, there’s an escape, and it’s the highest possible happiness. It’s outside of space, outside of time, and it’s not touched by the evolution and de-evolution of the cosmos. It’s totally free. So all the various purposes that you can make for your life, and that’s the whole point, is that you can decide for your own purpose. You can decide your own meaning. That would be the best. It’s simply a question of developing the qualities of mind that are needed to get there. That’s what the perfections are all about. If you look at the accomplishments of your life in terms of the mark that you’ve left behind, there are all too many things out there that are willing to erase that mark. But the qualities you build into your mind, nobody else can take those away. Someone once asked Ajahn Mun, “If your virtue is somehow separate from your mind, is that how it could be?” Your virtue is in your intentions, and your intentions are definitely part of your own mind. And if it could be separated from your mind, people would do just that. They’d come and steal your virtues. But because they can’t be separated, there’s no way it can be stolen. You’re the only one who can destroy your virtue. Why would you want to do that? So think about the qualities you want to build in life. The perfections give you a list. There’s generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, equanimity. These are the qualities you want to build in your life. These qualities, that the tradition has said, lead to awakening. It’s not a list you’ll find in anything attributed to the Buddha directly. It comes from the Jataka tales, which were later compilations. But they’re all qualities that the Buddha himself, at one point or another, would recommend. And it’s a good list to measure yourself against. Which one of those are you lacking in? Persistence, endurance. Those are the ones we tend to be weak in. But they all come under determination. In other words, you realize that your mind has lots of random desires. Some of them pull in a direction you want to go, and others pull in another direction that another part of you wants to go. But all too often, the decision is simply made on the basis of urges, thoughts that come into the mind and then go. You want to sit down and think about it. Where do you really want to go? What do you really want to accomplish inside? Then you’re going to make up your mind that that’s going to be your overriding resolve. It’s a promise you make to yourself. And then you want to stick with it, make sure that other desires that go against it don’t have any force against it, don’t override it. But it is your choice. That’s the important thing. So take some time to think. What would you like to accomplish in this lifetime? Specifically, what would you like to accomplish in the training of the mind, understanding the mind? One of the reasons we meditate is because we don’t really understand our minds. We need to look at them to see how they process things coming in through the senses. And they can process them in a way that’s based on ignorance that’s going to lead to suffering. If you decide to take the Buddha’s path, you start out with conviction in the Four Noble Truths, and you try to apply that. That turns them into a path. The path really comes together when it leads to something that is beyond. You have your first taste of it. It really is true what the Buddha said. There is this dimension outside of space, outside of time, and it really is the highest happiness. That’s something the mind can do. So think about how you live your life in relationship to that fact, or relationship to what you’re at the moment. It’s just a possibility. But it is a possibility. Don’t listen to the people who say that it’s impossible, because what do they know? They’ve never tried. Remember, the purpose of your life is something you decide. So before you make your determination on what your purpose is going to be, give it a lot of thought. If you’re not sure, tell yourself, “I want to understand my mind first.” That’s a good start. Understand how it creates suffering, understand how it can go about not creating suffering. That’s a good purpose to try out. Because as the Buddha said, with that kind of intention, you can go all the way. Which is why he taught just that handful of leaves.

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