Meaning & Purpose

October 5, 2023

We spend so much time with duties that we have to do, that it’s nice every now and then to take some time off. With nothing you have to do at all. But that doesn’t last very long. If you could think of having a life with no duties, with no responsibilities, no choices, it would get pretty depressing after a while. In fact, that’s what depression is. Deciding that you have no role in shaping your life. Whatever you do is futile. So you might as well just give up. We are creatures of purpose. So what the Buddha’s doing is to take that seriously. He says there is a really good purpose for our actions. Which is to find true happiness. We look for happiness in all kinds of ways. Some relatively skillful, some not. And he points us to more and more skillful ways of looking for happiness. So instead of sitting here just following your mind wherever it goes, give it something purposeful to do. Stay with the breath. Notice where it’s coming in, notice where it’s going out. Notice where you feel it in the body. When the Buddha explains the causes for suffering, he points out that there are two kinds of contact. There’s the immediate contact of your consciousness inside your body, where you sense the warmth, the coolness, the energy, the solidity of the body. And there’s contact at the senses. The sense doors, or the sense media, where you see forms, hear sounds, smell aromas, taste flavors, make tactile contact with things outside, or think about ideas. And as he focuses our attention to meditate, he wants us to focus attention on that first kind of contact, our immediate sense of the body. Feel it unmediated. And the breath is the most obvious of the different elements, so focus there. And it’s the one that you can control. You can make it longer, shorter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow. So instead of just sitting here allowing the breath to come in and out on its own, try to experiment to see what way of breathing would feel good. This is a good purpose to have. Notice what kind of perceptions help you with that purpose. First there’s the perception that this is a good thing to do. Then there’s the perception of what the breath is doing in the body. And John Lee talks about the different breath channels in the body, starting with the back of the neck, you breathe in, think of the breath coming in at the back there, then going down through the spine, down the legs, out to the toes, out from the toes, into the air. You focus on one side of the body, then on the other side of the body, back and forth. Or you can do both sides at once. The same with the breath, going down the back of the neck, through the shoulders and the arms. The breath energy coming in and out through the eyes and the ears. You can think of the body as being a large sponge. The breath comes in and out from everywhere, all around. As you play with this perception, or these perceptions, you’re creating a state of becoming. You, the breather, inhabiting the whole body. You, the awareness, inhabiting the whole body. Now we’re told that we’re trying to overcome our craving for becoming, but the Buddha always thought strategically. Someone showed me a video the other day, where some Abhidhamma expert was talking about how people who try to get the mind to be concentrated are suffering from greed, which is an unskillful state. When the mind gets still, and it’s not analyzing Dhammas, it’s suffering from delusion, which is another unskillful state. But if you can’t have any desire in your practice, and you have to spend all your time analyzing Dhammas, you’re not going to be able to complete the whole path. He was saying, trying to get the mind into concentration is actually an unskillful activity. The Buddha never said that. It’s a strategic part of the path. You develop concentration and develop your ability to enjoy it, because it’s going to be your foundation for gaining genuine insight, not just imposing terminology on what you see. It’s also going to give you practice in developing your powers of judgment as to what forms of happiness really are worth going for. Then you take it apart when it’s done its work. It’s like scaffolding that goes up when you build a building. You know the scaffolding is going to be impermanent. It’s not going to be here forever. But that doesn’t mean you do a shoddy job of making that scaffolding. You try to do a good job, because after all, you don’t want to fall down because the scaffolding was put together poorly. So you work on the scaffolding, make it good. And then you work on the building, make that good. Then you can take the scaffolding down. So work with the breath right now. Create this state of becoming, because it gives you several things that are going to be useful in the path. One is you have this state of well-being to compare the contact that you feel inside the body with the happiness that comes from that, the pleasure that comes from that, the sense of refreshment that can come from that. It’s a harmless pleasure, a harmless refreshment. It’s not like the pleasures of the senses. The pleasures of the senses can get us all wound up in greed, aversion, and delusion, and end up doing a lot of unskillful things. But the happiness that comes from that, the pleasure that comes from breathing in a comfortable way has never led anybody to kill, or steal, or have illicit sex, or to lie, or to take intoxicants. It’s a safe pleasure, a nourishing pleasure. So it’s okay to indulge in it. Then you realize it’s much better than a lot of the other pleasures you’ve had outside. That enables you to step back from the process of how you engage with your senses. You’re not so hungry, because you’re being well-fed. At the same time, as you create this state of becoming, it’s a lot clearer than the other states of becoming you’ve been indulging in, participating in. You get to see that you start out with an intention, a desire. And then how your perceptions get molded by that desire. Then how your perceptions then have an impact on further desires. It goes back and forth like this. You see how you talk to yourself. You see how you focus on different feelings, different perceptions. This allows you to see this process of becoming in action in a really clear way. Then you can take that insight and apply it to other states of becoming. You get a better and better sense of how you create your sense of you in different worlds of experience, and what an artificial thing that whole process is. And again, because you’ve got a really good state of becoming here, you can ask yourself about those other states. The intentions that motivate them. The results you get. Are they really worth it? Are they for your long-term welfare and happiness, or just short-term? This is where you start applying your wisdom and discernment. For the purpose of finding happiness that really is reliable. And you begin to appreciate more and more the path that the Buddha set out. It meets your purposes. Because all of us have as a purpose happiness and well-being. And the Buddha is simply pointing out, not that that purpose is a bad thing, or we should give up on it. If we gave up on it, we’d be miserable. We wouldn’t do it well. Given that we want happiness, you would think that everybody would pay a lot of attention to how they go about it. But it’s amazing how little real thought goes into it for a lot of people. They just get a glimpse here and there of what somebody else is doing. It looks happy. It looks good. Again, these perceptions can drive you. They have their meaning. They tell you that this means this and that means that. And sometimes they lie to you. It’s not that they’re lying, it’s just that you misinterpret them. So the Buddha is giving you a new set of perceptions, and a new purpose, or a new way of going about the purpose for happiness. There are people who say that the lesson you learn from meditation is that you have no choices. You have no free will. Everything is beyond your control. They present that as a happy thing. But the only people who would find that happy are the people who are afraid to be held responsible for anything. If you had no choices, you’d be stuck in a machine, and the machine’s going to grind you up. Or as the Buddha would say, you’re left unprotected. Your urges come up, and you have no way of saying no to them, because they seem to be happening on their own. And if you tell yourself you have no control, you’re at their mercy. And if you look at the suttas, or the Buddha’s teachings, you see that this is one particular type of wrong view that he was so serious about, so that it was so detrimental. He would actually go and argue with the people who taught it. He wasn’t the argumentative type. He didn’t pick fights for almost anything. People would come and pick fights with him, but as he said, he wasn’t out to argue with the world. But there were a couple of issues like this, where people said that you had no choice. Everything you experience is the result of past actions, so just accept it. They would say, you’re leaving people unprotected. Our protection comes from seeing that we do have choices, and the states of becoming we create, the perceptions and thought fabrications by which we create them. And then he points out that this process, which in so many ways can lead to suffering, can be turned to make a path to the end of suffering. That’s a large part of his genius. We suffer because we’re attached to form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness. But we can use those things to create the path. We hold on as long as we need to. The Buddha makes a comparison with relay chariots. You take one chariot, it takes you a certain distance, then you get into another one, at that point it takes you again into another one. Finally you arrive at your destination. You don’t have to ride around in the chariots anymore. You let them go. So try to get really good at this type of becoming, and the perceptions that help you stay here, and to see things more clearly inside. Because this activity is sort of the best purpose of all, in the mind, which is a creature of purpose and meaning. We’ll find true satisfaction, and happiness that doesn’t die.

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