

Meaning & Happiness

September 13, 2019

One of the Buddha's insights on the night of his awakening was that the universe doesn't have any purpose, doesn't have any meaning. It just goes around and around and around. As he said later, it would be very hard to find someone who hadn't been your mother in all that long, long time, your father in all that long, long time. Sister, brother, son, daughter... relationships come and go. They don't lead anywhere.

These insights can be very alienating because our minds want purpose. We live based on desire. We have goals. That's how we find meaning in life. A life without meaning is a life that no one would want to live.

The Buddha's realization was that you have to give meaning to yourself. But if you look for meaning in relationships—they can be relationships of power, relationships of wealth, human relationships of almost any kind—they all fall apart. Either the relationship turns bad or it stays good and one side has to die. That's where he decided that the only really worthwhile meaning you can give to yourself is to look for something that doesn't die, something that's worth the effort that goes into it. So he offered this as a challenge. First it was a challenge to himself, and he was able to fulfill it. Now he offers it as a challenge to everyone else. When a deathless happiness is possible, do you want to content yourself with anything less?

The problem, of course, is that he couldn't take that deathless happiness out and show it to anybody. Ajaan Maha Bua once said that if you could take nibbana out and show it to people, they wouldn't want anything else. But it's *paccattam*, as we chant: something that each person has to find for him or herself alone. And on top of that, there are so many people out there clamoring for your support in whatever they think is a happy life.

Ajaan Fuang talks about parents who don't like to have their children meditate. They like to content themselves with the idea that they did as best as possible by having a family and finding meaning in the family, and when the children start looking for something more than that, the parents feel threatened. They try to pull the child back into looking for happiness in relationships. Ajaan Fuang's comparison is of someone who stepped in dog shit and then tries to get everyone else to step in dog shit.

So think carefully about where you're going to find meaning in life, where you're going to find happiness. It's such an important issue that you'd think people would really be careful about where they look for examples. But we have this tendency: "So-and-so says they're happy, well, maybe they really are happy. I'm miserable. This path is taking a long, long time. Why don't I follow

them?” Well, look carefully at the people you take as your examples. People’s mouths have no laws. They can say anything they want. You have to look at them, look at their behavior, look at where their happiness is going. Decide who you want to listen to.

This one of the reasons why *sanghanussati*, recollection of the Sangha, is so useful, especially when you’re going away from the monastery. We’re surrounded by so many people with so many different opinions, and anything goes in this land of wrong view. So it’s good to keep alive in your mind the fact that there have been real people who were able to find real happiness, true happiness, through developing qualities of their minds: qualities like generosity, virtue, renunciation.

As we’re sitting here right here, right now, that’s a type of renunciation: Renouncing our fascination with sensual pleasures and looking for something deeper. Discernment, endurance, effort, truthfulness, determination good-will, equanimity: These are all good qualities to develop inside. And a life devoted to developing them is a meaningful life. It heads some place. A life devoted to relationships just ends with death or separation. But a life devoted to the perfections leaves you with the perfections you’ve developed. You carry those over to the next life. You can build on them from there, amassing more and more over time.

So keep in mind the people who have lived this way. We have examples in the Canon: the Therigatha, Theragatha, the suttas that tell us about the monks and nuns who came from all kinds of backgrounds and had all kinds of problems in their minds and yet were able to work through their problems. We have the lives of the ajaans. They give us examples: This is how human beings can live. They can live deliberate lives—lives where they’ve thought through all the implications of what they’re doing, what they really want, and trim things down, pare things down, that get in the way of that object, get in the way of that purpose, that meaning. The Pali word, *attha*, means many things: meaning, purpose, and benefit. So what is your *attha*, what is your benefit, what is your purpose, what is your meaning?

I’ve told you the story of my friend who was an author. She taught at a university and every time she wrote a novel she would be invited to the different alumni clubs to read from her novel, so she had to choose an incident in the novel that was a nice, self-contained episode, that she could read in about fifteen minutes. For her last novel, the episode she chose was the story of a young woman who lost her mother. Her father, at first, says he’s not going to remarry but then he does remarry. He marries a courtesan. But the courtesan is a good woman.

One evening she’s playing chess with the young girl, and as they’re playing chess she tells her, “If you really want to be happy in life you have to decide

that there's one thing you want more than anything else, and you're willing to sacrifice everything else for that one thing." The young girl's half listening, half not listening, and she begins to notice that her stepmother is a sloppy player, losing pieces here and there, so the young girl gets more aggressive. What happens, though, is she falls into her stepmother's trap. Checkmate.

The stepmother was illustrating her story by the way she played chess. She was willing to lose some pieces but she kept one thing in mind:, that she wanted to win the game. My friend read the episode to two or three alumni clubs and she realized she had to choose another episode to read from the novel. Nobody liked the message. Everyone wants to keep all their pawns, keep all their pieces, and win. But life doesn't work that way. We have to make sacrifices.

It's a principle of the Dhamma: If you see a lesser happiness that gets in the way of a greater happiness, you have to be willing to give up the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater. A British translator of that passage wrote a footnote saying that this couldn't possibly be the meaning of this verse, it's too simple, too basic, who needs a Buddha to tell us that? It may be simple, it may be basic, but nobody wants to hear it. That's why we're so miserable. True happiness requires sacrifice, dedication. It requires determination; it requires conviction; it requires circumspection.

Be very careful about how you choose your models. Don't listen to just anybody. Once you've chosen a good model, see what's getting in the way of following that model. Be willing to give up the things that get in the way. Hold onto the things that are maybe difficult to do but have to be done. And try to keep your mind calm in the midst of all this. In other words, don't get excited by somebody who comes along and says, "Well, I found happiness with drugs, or I found happiness with relationships, or I found happiness with whatever..." Your happiness is something too important for that kind of attitude. So take it seriously. Not in a grim sense, but take it seriously. And give your life a focus that really does give it meaning.

You can think of the Buddha. He worked all those many, many lifetimes to become Buddha, not only for his own purpose but also so that he could teach. But there was a fascinating incident right after his awakening. He began to have second thoughts about that teaching career. This got a brahma all upset, so the brahma came down to invite him to teach, saying that there are people who have little dust in their eyes, they'll understand. And the Buddha confirmed this with his knowledge, so he decided to teach. Now, the commentary tries to explain this away, saying that the Buddha didn't really mean it when he said he might not teach. He was just fishing for an invitation. But we have to remember, after the Buddha gained awakening, he had no debts to anybody. He taught not because he had to, or because when he was

unenlightened he had already made that vow. His decision to teach came out of total freedom, from an awakened mind. He could have not taught, because he didn't owe anything to anybody.

That's the kind of happiness we should all look for, a happiness where we don't owe anything to anybody. Because otherwise we're constantly in debt. This person has helped us, that person has helped us. We have to think about those debts. There are people we've wronged. We have to think about those debts. But those debts are all wiped out at awakening.

So think about that: the possibility of a totally debt-free happiness. A happiness that carries no obligations. Then, when any other forms of happiness are proposed to you, make sure you keep the Buddha's happiness in mind, and that you keep your standards high.