

Meaning (2 of 5) Self and Others

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Welcome to the second talk on the topic of meaning and meaning-making in relation to meditation.

First, I want to say there is a cliché that everyone is a philosopher, but many don't know it. I think that means everyone has a set of interpretations, meanings, and understanding of what it means to be alive, what is important, what this life is about that they operate from. Sometimes people haven't thought about that or haven't realized that they're doing that. Part of the path of mindfulness is to be reflective, clear, and conscious, but also to discover some of the underlying assumptions, belief systems, and interpretations we are basing our life on.

As we sit quietly in meditation, it is possible to see those beliefs operate and then question them. Some of them are not helpful or healthy for us and some of them are. To be able to distinguish between that which is useful and not useful, that which is accurate and not accurate, is part of the wonderful power of meditation, of mindfulness.

One area of meaning-making in connection to meditation is our understanding of what it means to be a self and what it means to have other people in relationship to a self. A lot of philosophy and ideas come along with our notions of who we are, who others are, and what that connection is.

There is a wonderful story around this topic. Someone did a study, some years ago, of different meditation centers. I think they were all in the United States. The participants, the meditators, were primarily born and raised in the United States. They were acculturated into the culture of the United States. And some participants were acculturated into Asian cultures, which had a much stronger collectivist culture, a much stronger communal sense of identity. Whereas people who grew up in the culture of the United States have a much stronger sense of individuality and the individual. So the researchers studied these two different meditation centers. They asked the participants: How was the retreat? They both did week-long retreats. How was the retreat and what did you gain or what were the benefits from the retreat?

Both groups loved the retreat. It was fantastic and life-changing so both groups had that in common. But when they discussed what they benefited from, what way the retreat was so great, in one way or the other, the people who had been raised in this local culture of the United States emphasized that they discovered who they are. They got a sense of real independence and freedom. All the reference points were very individualistic.

Those people who came from Asian cultures said: "Oh, I realized how much gratitude I have for my society, my family, how deeply connected we are. I appreciated so much more all the benefits I received from my society, my family, and the sense of connection, gratitude, and being part of something was so powerful for me."

In many ways, you could say that they had a similar experience of settling, getting concentrated, becoming still, and letting go of hindrances, but the meaning or the value that they took out of the experience, what they selected out of their experiences as *this* is what is important was so very different. One was very individualistic; the other was more about how they were in their collective.

Often, it is invisible that we make that selection. It seems natural. Of course, isn't this what it's all about? Because the view we have of what's important is not just taken for granted, it's built into the fabric of the universe that self is important and discovering the self.

A similar thing happened to me many years ago when I was on a panel with a Christian minister. I was the Buddhist teacher on the panel. The person I was with was Asian American, and I represented people from the United States, I guess, or Europe. Norway, where I'm from, is very individualistic, maybe even more so sometimes than the way we are in the United States.

We were asked, what brought you to your religion? I, in a happy, matter-of-fact way, talked about finding myself, finding inner freedom. The Christian minister talked about how much her faith put her into a community of fellow people in relationship to society. That was meaningful for her. She found a sense of belonging and home. So people coming to religion have very different orientations of what they are looking for and what they want.

We also come with ideas of what it means to be an individual, what it means to be a self, what's important. So when we sit down to meditate, part of our motivation can be about that self. You might be looking for how to advance in your career. You've been told that you're too anxious, and so you come to meditation to get calmer and quieter. That is how you will be more respected at work. So it's all about "me" attaining something.

Maybe someone has been told: "You don't really fit into the community here very well. You might try meditating because then you'll relax and start feeling more connected to the people around you." So meditation can have a different function for different people, depending on what seems important to them.

There is also the locus of what's valued the most around the self. Is the self as an autonomous, independent person what's most important, and we have to realize that and find it? Or is the self as someone embedded in a system of relationships with other people what's most important, and we have to somehow make those social connections? That meditation is going to help us feel connected to society, much more part of it in a deeper way.

In my early years, when I was first coming to Buddhism and was here with many new people coming to Buddhism, I saw how some people were coming to find themselves. And, instead of finding themselves, or maybe they did find themselves, at some point, they found themselves back in a deeper connection to the religion they grew up with. So they would go back to a church or a synagogue in a way that they participated more in the collective life of it.

I've seen other people come to Buddhism and find a sense of community there, and that is kind of what is more important than meditation. Culturally, personally, philosophically, that is what they think is important. Some people, for whatever reason, find that their engagement with Buddhism is always very personal. They're happy to go off and be hermits on long periods of meditation without much connection to others. Is one better or worse than the other? I would rather not think that way. There are all these ways of organizing meaning and purpose in this world of ours, and maybe they all have a place, they all have a role. There's a time and season for all things. There's a place in society for maybe all the different ways that we can construct our sense of self, our sense of meaning, our sense of being connected to others.

This is an adventure, kind of like a discovery. As I said in the meditation, it's kind of like the powers of ten – that meditation takes you into some deep, quiet, still, letting go place. And in that deep place, how do we then interpret or understand our sense of self, what is important around the self, what the self is in relation to our needs, motivations, purposes, and place in this world? Or what is that connection from that deep place of freedom as we come back to powers of ten, back into the world, back into society? Not a few people have found themselves transformed such that their understanding of what it means to be in relationship to other people has radically changed. A simple way of understanding would be that many people are codependent. They have a very deep sense of neediness, really measuring their success and well-being in relationship to other people and comparing themselves to other people. To really delve deep to the powers of ten – to go within, going within, within – letting go of the social world for a while, can be transformative so that when we come back into the social world, that sense of neediness and comparing ourselves to others is not there anymore.

The social world can then have a very different meaning than it had before. How much meaning it has, how important it is depends in part on the meaning-making, the understandings that we have about our place in the world – who we are and who we are in relationship to other people. We shouldn't assume that two meditators share the same understanding of what is most important and where they most center their life. Is it more in the community or more in the individual? What other secondary understandings come from that?

So without saying any of that is right or wrong, I would like to say it's important to become reflective and to think deeply, to realize what assumptions and beliefs around self and others we are operating under. To dismiss this whole investigation of self (because Buddhism says there's no self kind of or not to focus on self), we almost miss or do not notice that we actually have, almost subconsciously, unconsciously, deeply embedded notions and operating principles around what it means to be a self and what kind of selective process attention is used for to pick out, recognize, and know in this world what is important.

I offer this with the hope that you might spend time today talking with friends and others about your own central focus on and understanding of what it means to be a self, an individual. What beliefs and ideas come along with your sense of personhood? What is it to be a person in society? What beliefs, ideas, and understandings come along with how you are embedded in society? Are you embedded or are you really removed? What is that connection there?

By reflecting deeply on those things, I hope that when you come to do your meditation, some of those things can be put to rest temporarily. They won't be operating and churning away in some quiet, deep way and allow some power of ten to open up for you. Whether it is power of ten deeper and deeper in or power of ten further and further out, that is for you to discover. So thank you.