

Finding our Way (3 of 5) With Joy and Despair

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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This is the third talk in a five-part series on finding our way with different pairs of states we experience, which sometimes exist in relationship to each other and sometimes can exist independently of each other. Sometimes these states we experience can be healthy, and sometimes they can be unhealthy. Today, the pair is joy and despair.

I think of the joy that has awakened in me through Buddhist practice as a big “yes.” Something brightens inside of me, opens, and delights me with joy. In that regard, despair is this “no, oh no” – kind of a giving up, a deflation, a drop in energy, a sinking, maybe a feeling of hopelessness or great disappointment, or a great sense of fear of what might come. This “yes” movement and “no” movement can exist together. It’s a little like yesterday with gladness and sadness. Joy can come from hope, and when hope is dashed or there is no hope, it can bring a lot of despair.

One of the strong associations with joy and despair has to do with purpose. When we have a clear sense of healthy purpose, there can be a “yes” to that. Our system, our being, gets involved in doing it. When there’s no sense of purpose or the purpose seems hopeless, is not working out, or we can’t engage in it, then there can be despair about not fulfilling this purpose that’s important for us.

The question is what is the purpose we have? Is it a valuable, healthy purpose? There can be joy in the engagement and doing of things that are unhealthy. You can be fully immersed and engaged in eating only desserts for lunch and dinner. The concentration, the absorption, everything else in the world falls away because it’s just dessert. That can be joyful. The feeling of engagement is so nice, but it might not be healthy for you.

There might be things that are healthy to do, but the way we engage in them is not healthy. We might do it with resentment, reluctance, or hesitation. We don’t really give ourselves over to doing it. Maybe we can’t be successful because we’re doing it half-heartedly. But it’s an important thing to do, and so we feel the despair of something that is healthy to do.

So what is the purpose? What is the intention? It’s a very important part of human life, and valuable to do in our spiritual life, to spend time reflecting on the purpose, the intention, the reasons, the goals that we have set for what we’re doing. And this can set up joy or despair. Even wonderful, important, valuable spiritual and meditation purposes can bring a lot of despair if we are unsuccessful in doing them, if we don’t reach what we’re trying to do.

What I’d like to propose is that it’s important to spend time reflecting on what our purposes are, whether the purpose is to cook a meal or clean the dishes, or the purpose is to develop spiritual maturity in our Buddhist practice. These motivations and purposes are important to become clear about, so we can inhabit them. We can really say “yes” to it and engage. Hopefully, it’s a healthy purpose, and you have an appropriate sense of how to attain it. For example, if your purpose is to get enlightened, but you don’t even know how to do breath meditation, you first need to learn the basics of breath meditation and learn about the hindrances. So there are earlier purposes we have to inhabit and follow through on before we can attain the later ones.

The sense of purpose I’m talking about here is not an abstract purpose, which may be a distant, important one. Rather, the sense of purpose represents each step of what we do, how we engage in the moment in the direction of that purpose. For example, if the purpose is to develop strong concentration, then engage fully while understanding your hindrances. Without becoming wise about the hindrances, you probably won’t get reliably and healthily concentrated. So engage in that process – study the hindrances. That becomes the purpose, That is what you engage yourself in.

Despair can come when we don’t have a purpose, when we don’t have an engagement. So this idea of joy and

despair, which are healthy, is founded or based on a healthy sense of purpose. Then we can learn how to inhabit that purpose in the moment, doing in the moment what's appropriate for that purpose. Not sitting there just daydreaming about a big purpose far in the future. But if the purpose is important enough, you ask: "What do I enter into? What do I need to do now?" In the previous example, the purpose is to develop strong concentration. The next step might be to read about the hindrances and so you purposefully engage in that. You wouldn't read a book or an article about the hindrances like you would read a novel for entertainment, just being carried along to relax. You would do it purposefully. Engage in it, but not in a stressful way, of course. This is where the art of it is – doing it in a way that brings you joy. There's a "yes." There's the art of doing, of engaging, that brings joy.

Not a lot of people have learned this. They've learned it in certain areas, certain things that are fun to do. They can really enjoy doing that. But there's an art to learning how to do anything you need to do joyfully, in a way that's a big "yes." There is joy in doing it.

The more senior monks in the Buddhist monasteries in Japan are assigned the task of toilet cleaning. Maybe they have the spiritual maturity to really do it. Perhaps, you have to clean the toilet. You might not like cleaning the toilet because it's a little gross, and so you do it half-heartedly. But rather, to do it fully – really *this* is what you're doing, this is your life energy, for this moment. Clean the toilet as if it's everything, it's the whole. Just give yourself to "yes."

What I'm teaching here today is a lot of what I learned through Zen training – where if you sweep the courtyard, that's what you do. You give yourself over to it. Toilets, whatever you're doing, you give yourself to it. And surprisingly, it's possible to learn to feel a sense of joy, delight, and happiness in giving yourself over to it.

Even if you're sick and don't have much energy, what would giving yourself over to a task look like? What does it look like given the conditions of your life when you're sick or in pain? Whatever the circumstances are, the sense of doing is in harmony with that, with yourself, and with the world around you. But this is what you're doing. You say "yes" to this. This can be overdone. It can be done with stress, so you're exhausted at the end. But we can learn the art of doing something fully, but we're also relaxed in doing it.

This art of appreciating the value of what we're actually doing while we're doing it can be a source of tremendous joy, and this kind of joy can grow. Part of the despair that people can experience is when they have no sense of purpose, when the purpose they had for their life kind of gets shattered, or they're unsuccessful in the purpose. Purpose is very important. And so the relationship between purpose – fulfilling a purpose, engaging in a purpose – and your joy and despair is something to reflect on and look at and consider.

Certainly, knowing you're doing something meaningful and purposeful can be a source of joy. But if the purpose is only an abstraction ("Oh, I'm doing something wonderful"), then you're missing where the juice is, where the real heart is of this practice of mindfulness and the way it can really grow in your life.

Give yourself to the purpose of the moment. Whatever bigger purpose you have if you're pursuing it or engaged in it, what are the steps of the moment? For example, let's say that the big purpose is to develop concentration in meditation. You've heard that reading about the hindrances, learning about them, and understanding them well is a very important stepping stone for concentration. But, you don't have a book on the hindrances. So you decide to go to the library to get one. Now, walking to the library, driving to the library, biking to the library – that is the task of the moment. You set the course to go to the library; you give yourself over to going to the library. When you get to the library – and this is how it works in a monastery – when you open the library door, you give yourself over to opening that door. You give yourself over to walking down the aisles and finding the book.

It's in the doing where something really important comes up: doing things in a purposeful way, an intentional way, so that you find joy in it. I'm not suggesting this is easy, but it's possible to live a life of "yes." And if the purpose is valuable and you find value in inhabiting and engaging in what you're doing, then it doesn't matter so much if you're successful. You might fail at things, but you're so happy about the way you did it. The way you did it was rewarding. And if you're successful or not successful, your joy, happiness, and well-being are less dependent eventually on the success or failure, but on how you did it, how you were involved with what you did.

I may have given you lots to think about and to engage with, but I would like to make a few key points. Reflect on purpose. What role does purpose have in your life? Have you dismissed the value of purpose? Can you find a sense of purpose? It doesn't have to be a big purpose. It could be the small purpose of the next five minutes or the next hour. What's the purpose you have? And then, the "yes" of engaging in purpose, in the small step-by-step ways it takes to get there, not to be ahead of yourself from the activity of the moment. Find the "yes" in the

engagement, in the steps to whatever you're doing – may that be purposeful as well. Finding purpose in how you do things is one of the great joys and secrets of a well-developed life.

This will support your mindfulness practice. It's a way of manifesting mindfulness in our lives. I hope you enjoy it. I hope you find a delightful day with “yes” to whatever you're doing and exploring your sense of purpose. Thank you.