

Ten Reflections (2 of 10) Purpose

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Welcome to the second talk on the ten profound reflections for living a Dharma life, a spiritual life, and a whole life. These ten reflections are not just good for Dharma practice. They're actually very important reflections for any human life because they point to the totality of our profound concerns – all the profound ways in which we are animated and motivated to live a full life.

Yesterday I talked about meaning. Today, following and closely connected to meaning, is purpose. Tomorrow will be agency, followed by autonomy, identity, dignity, community, kinship, and then healing and reconciliation. Each of these is worth giving time to. So in some ways, we are going through these quickly over the ten days we're meeting. But I'm hoping this gives you a valuable orientation for how to think about and consider your life.

So today's talk is about purpose. It is closely connected to meaning. Meaning sometimes provides a sense of purpose in a general way for how we're living our lives, but it also provides purpose for the particular activity we're engaged in at any given time. If we've stopped at a gas station to put gasoline in our car, we can ask, what's the purpose of doing that? It's to put gas in our car. Then we check it off – we've recognized the purpose.

But we can ask the question more deeply: "Yes, but what's the purpose of having gasoline in my car? So my car can take me places. But what's the purpose of that? The purpose of that is so I can do the things that are important in my life – visit people who are sick, or go to work and be able to support my family. And what's the purpose of that?"

In that question – what's the purpose? – there are layers and layers. We can keep asking, what's the purpose? until we find, maybe, that what we're doing doesn't really have a valuable purpose. Sometimes the purpose is just to become wealthy. Promotions at work might seem very important and drive a person's behavior day and night sometimes. But when we really get down to the roots of our lives, maybe that purpose doesn't really support us. It is not really so great to have that be the primary purpose of our life.

When we go to the gas station to get gasoline, what's the purpose there? Maybe the purpose is to pay cash to a cashier – to have a human interaction with someone, take the time to look at them and say hello, and see what's possible. We can add purposes to what we do and animate it with something of great value.

We can reflect on the purpose of our lives. What's the purpose of our work? What's the purpose of our activity? Are we imbuing it with a purpose that's valuable? This relates to the Buddhist idea that whatever we're doing, we should consider whether it's wholesome or unwholesome, beneficial or not beneficial, skillful or not skillful, healthy or unhealthy.

The idea of something being wholesome means that not only is it wholesome and valuable in and of itself, but it also brings good consequences. In Buddhism, the sense of purpose is to do the things that have beneficial consequences. Do they benefit my own spiritual growth? How does the way I stop to get gasoline benefit my spiritual growth? Maybe it doesn't really benefit it to multitask and be on the phone and pump gas at the same time. What's beneficial is to have the stability, the calm, and the centeredness to just be there for the activity of getting the gas.

So the idea of wholesomeness is a training ground for presence and attention. Over the long term, we're developing our capacity to be here and present so that we're not divided or distracted, so something deep can well up inside.

Is what we're doing beneficial for other people, for instance, how we pay a cashier? Does the way we do it have any benefit for them? I've had some wonderful conversations with cashiers in the supermarket. I especially like to go early in the morning when there are not a lot of people there. There's a wonderful chance to have some connection then. I don't know if some of the cashiers remember me, but I remember them. They have a warm place in my heart just because they're there early in the morning. and we had a wonderful connection.

In Buddhism, one sense of purpose is that there's a path of practice, a path of spiritual growth that we can be engaged in. That purpose is extremely valuable. It's very meaningful to be on a path to liberation, to freedom. This means liberation from all the forces that are harmful, that diminish us, contract us, or move us away from the path of liberation, freedom, openness, joy, and generosity. These are all considered wholesome things.

Having a sense of purpose that we think is valuable is motivating. It gives us a reason to wake up in the morning. It gives us a reason to go to work, for example, not just to get a paycheck, but to do something more profound for ourselves and others. Whatever we're doing, we're seeing it as part and parcel of this profoundly meaningful thing to do – to live a Dharma life, a life that is on the path of practice.

The Buddha made a remarkable statement that inspired me very much when I heard it the first time, and it still does. He said (this is my paraphrase): "Do what is wholesome. If it was not possible to do what is wholesome, I would not teach you to do what is wholesome. But it is possible to do what is wholesome."

So, it is possible. We *can* do this path. We can cultivate ourselves. We can develop ourselves. We can do what is healthy, skillful, and purposeful. We can have a sense of purpose that has meaning and value and feels important to us so that when we go about our lives, we're connected to this deep sense of purpose. The sense of purpose is also a wonderful reflection when you're thinking about anything you're going to do or any decision you're making. Ask the question, "Why do I want to do this? What is the purpose of this activity? Does the purpose really serve what is most valuable to me or the world around me? What is the purpose of this?"

Often we do simple things that are meant to distract us or relieve us of some of our stresses, challenges, and difficulties. They might be very purposeful and meaningful to do. But sometimes they actually take us away from ourselves and don't help us do the really important work that needs to happen in order to heal, develop, and move into the world in a full and dedicated way. So we keep checking in with ourselves: "What's the purpose of this? What's the purpose of this?"

To add to that, ask: "Is there a purpose I can add to this? Yes, I have to do this and it's a drag, but can I imbue it with a higher purpose?" Don't settle for the obvious purpose (getting gas – I'm just getting gas). Can I imbue getting gas with a higher purpose, or deeper purpose? What is the purpose of what I'm doing? Why am I doing it?"

It is invaluable to find a profound, important, or valuable sense of purpose for our lives. This can be found any time at all, even if we're on our deathbed. Even there, we can ask, what's the purpose here and now? Is the purpose as I'm dying to linger in my resentments about what happened 20 or 30 years ago? Is the purpose to worry about the future that I have no control over anymore because I only have maybe minutes or an hour left? There is a purpose of letting go fully. There's now a possibility of letting go in a deep, full way, being really present here and now without the extra tension of past and future – worries, regrets, anticipations, and dreams about the future. There is a possibility of just being here so fully that even the sense of dying disappears because it's just breathing, just here, now. This is invaluable. There's purpose in the freedom of being here for this.

I've offered you some words of my own on this topic of the sense of purpose. I don't present these ideas as the definitive discussion about these ten qualities we're talking about. I'm just trying to offer you some of my reflections on them and what's valuable for me, with the idea that hopefully, these reflections can be a catalyst for you to think about this for yourself. Maybe you'll come up with very different understandings for each of these ten reflections. But if my reflections have prompted that reflection, great. I'm happy about that. Because these are a really important part of life. You can't use someone else's answers for what these mean to any of you.

Spend some time for the next 24 hours reflecting on purpose. What are the purposes that you live by? Is there some sense of purpose that's really foundational or fundamental, deeper than anything else? A sense of purpose that can animate the more obvious purposes and reasons why you do things and imbue them with a

really deep life purpose or spiritual purpose for yourself and others. Reflect on purpose – why you do things. See what you learn. And keep asking the question: “I have this purpose. What's the purpose for that purpose? Why is that so important?” Just keep asking that, and see how deep you can go. You can go through the different levels and layers of your heart and mind and understand yourself better and better. If you have friends you can talk to or if you can journal about this topic, great. Take it as far as you have time and interest in doing. Tomorrow we'll do the very important topic of agency, which is related to meaning and purpose. Thank you.