

Ten Reflections (1 of 10) Meaning

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Hello everyone and welcome. This Monday, I'd like to start a new ten-part series of teachings for the next two weeks. It's on ten areas of reflection for a Dharma life. Each day, I'll be giving one of the ten reflections. I'm hoping that the words I say will inspire you to reflect on these concepts. I'll be offering my own ideas about these concepts, but not as the definitive presentation. Rather, I want to bring up some things that you can reflect on on your own and come up with ideas for yourself about how they work for you.

These ten reflections are adapted from my studies of chaplaincy. Chaplaincy is spiritual care that's done in the world of chaplaincy – hospitals and prisons and all kinds of other places where chaplains work. Chaplains have a particular orientation, especially since they're interfaith chaplains. They're not looking for particular religious ideas, but for spiritual qualities or characteristics that are central to people's lives and that they want to address, because chaplains often meet people at times of personal, family, and social crisis.

In times of crisis, something is often broken. Something is really challenging for people in their spiritual and personal lives. Chaplains can pay attention to these ten areas to see where something is broken, and where something needs to be healed, understood, or reflected on in a deeper way. I find it very useful to take these ten qualities from chaplaincy and apply them to a Dharma life. I'll try to do that for these two weeks, in the hope that you will reflect on them, make them your own, and see how they work for you.

These ten areas are really five areas in which each area has two qualities or characteristics. I'll briefly summarize the ten, then I'll go through them one at a time. When they are divided into just five categories, they have to do with meaning, agency, identity, community, and healing. When these five areas go well, when they are healed, resolved, or developed well for people, they correlate to five positive emotional states. Maybe you'll come up with different correlations for yourself.

For me, I think that meaning corresponds with inspiration, agency corresponds with freedom, identity corresponds with confidence, community corresponds with love, and healing corresponds with wholeness – the sense of being whole. Each of these five areas is divided into two. The idea of purpose is added to the world of meaning. (It's interesting that I use the word “world” here.) The idea of autonomy is added to the world of agency. The concept of dignity, value, and worth is added to the world of identity. The idea of kinship is added to the idea of community. The idea of reconciliation is added to healing.

It begins with meaning. In my personal history with Buddhism, especially starting in Zen Buddhism, I would say that I had a challenging or difficult relationship with the idea of meaning. I probably thought that the idea of meaning would be overlaying a concept on top of our direct experience. I was more interested in just showing up and being present for things as they are, not adding something on top. Nowadays, I think that's still true – it is invaluable to show up for things as they are, but part of how things are *is* meaning.

Meaning isn't an overlay. Meaning is its own thing. Meaning has to do with what we see as most valuable, and the values we live by and organize our life by. Meaning has to do with the orientations around which we organize ourselves to decide how we communicate with other people, and how we relate to them and to ourselves. All this fits under the category of what we think is the meaning of our life, where we find meaning in what we do, and why we do what we do.

In my Zen years, I avoided the word “meaning,” but instead I used the word “intention.” I think that meaning and intention don't have to be so separate. Where we have meaning, we find intention. Where we have intention,

there is something that has meaning or importance for us. I found in my studies of my intentionality that there were layers and layers of intentions. I might have a surface intention, but I wouldn't stop there and decide that was the intention. I kept looking for what was underneath that: what fuels that? What is most important? What is the most important fundamental intention that is prior to all the others? What do we hold most important in our lives? What is most meaningful for us? Is it family? For some people, that's most important. Is it a sense of contributing to society? Is it personal fulfillment? Is it having fun and adventure? Is it understanding, truth, discovering, and learning?

I don't want to make a hierarchy with one of these being more important than the others. But I want to give you a sense of possibilities. Different people, for whatever reasons – personality, the way they were born, the way they were raised, their culture – will hold different things as important and meaningful enough that they want to live by them. These meanings guide them in how they want to live their life, in what's important to do, and in what they want to do.

When there's no sense of meaning, when something is meaningless, people get depressed. People feel a sense of hopelessness and feel lost. Sometimes we have done things that seemed meaningful at a certain phase of their life, but as we got older, they didn't hold any meaning anymore. We kept pursuing certain things beyond the time that they had any value for us. So there was a sense of vacuity, emptiness, or lack of energy and inspiration around doing them.

When there's no inspiration, is it because something about what's meaningful for us has been challenged? Maybe what's meaningful for us can't be fulfilled, we can't act on it, or what we have been acting on and found meaningful is no longer meaningful. We might feel deeply betrayed and discouraged. We might have devoted ourselves to something we thought was meaningful, but then we found out that the people involved weren't living up to what we thought they were. Or the whole thing was kind of a facade and didn't seem to be what it had promised to be on the surface. So we get discouraged when what was meaningful is no longer meaningful. The sense of meaning – the sense of how we organize and orient our lives – is no longer being supported. Then we have to look around and see what we can rely on to have meaning.

So there is a tremendous amount of human suffering around the topic of meaning. There can also be a tremendous sense of inspiration and joy in finding and having meaning. There are people who have gone through a tremendous crisis in life, and when they find meaning in the middle of it, can go through it with confidence and success. Victor Frankl, who wrote a famous book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, was inspired by his experience in the Nazi concentration camp. There he observed that for the prisoners who had some meaning around their lives in the concentration camps, that was enough to keep them alive or keep them going. The ones who had no meaning, whose meaning was destroyed or lost, were the ones who most likely were going to die in those circumstances.

The point is that meaning is what can animate our lives and help us through tremendous challenges and difficulties that otherwise would be discouraging. We can stay inspired if we find meaning. So we can ask, what's the meaning in it?

In Buddhism, there's tremendous meaning in finding a practice, mindfulness, finding a path, and knowing there's a path. There is tremendous meaning in not succumbing to hatred, greed, and fear – not being overwhelmed by these forces, and just knowing we're on a path to become free of them. We don't have to be free of them. But there is meaning in knowing we can become free, and we have a path that leads to freedom from being oppressed by ourselves – at least not adding our own contribution of suffering to the difficulties of life.

This can be tremendously inspiring and can help people go through tremendous difficulties. We'll see later how important this is as we talk about autonomy and agency. For today, I would like to propose that human beings have a tremendous need for meaning and meaningfulness. Even people who don't recognize that in themselves, with deeper reflection, will probably see that there's something around which they organize themselves that has to do with meaning.

So ask yourselves, what is your meaning? Where do you find meaning? What are the layers of meaning and layers of importance that you want to organize yourself around? What are your values, sense of purpose, and ideas about how to be in the world and why to be in the world? That's my proposal, for those of you who would like: to reflect on this and think about it for the next 24 hours. You might write about it a little bit if you want to.

Something different happens when you write about these kinds of profound things and then go back and read them, which allows us to reflect even more deeply or to have conversations with friends around the topic of meaning. Then we'll continue tomorrow. Thank you very much.