

## *A Good Purpose in Life*

*May 27, 2019*

As the Buddha pointed out, everything we experience is based on desire. Nibbana is the only thing that's not based on desire, but to get there you have to develop the path, which *is* based on desire. And even if we're not on the path, the fact that we have all these desires and that they underlie everything we experience means that our experience is purposeful. The mind has its purpose. The world outside doesn't seem to have much of a purpose. It goes around and around, creates all kinds of suffering, leaving a lot of suffering in its wake. It's very wasteful. But our minds are different.

We live with our purposes. When people say there's no purpose in their life, they don't want to live anymore. The question is, what kind of purpose do you want? What kind of purpose will really be satisfying? Our society tries to turn us into consumers. Even when we come to the Dhamma, we think of it as something to consume. We want certain experiences. But the consumer life is a pretty meaningless one. As Ajaan Suwat often liked to point out, those pleasures you consumed last week: Where are they now? They're gone. You keep looking for new ones and new ones and new ones. There's never enough, and yet look at how your life is lived chasing these things. You look back on it and it's sad.

You realize there has to be more to life than just consuming. There has to be developing. The mind has to develop in a direction where it feels that it's really accomplishing something good, something solid. That's what the Dhamma offers us, not just neat experiences in the meditation, but an opportunity to develop good qualities in the mind, qualities that can ultimately take us out of this need to consume so that we're not feeding all the time. We're not placing a burden on others by having to feed. That's a good goal, an honorable goal, and fortunately, we do honorable things in order to find it. And as we're developing the mind, we're developing the heart as well.

In fact, in most Buddhist cultures, starting with the Pali language, the words for "heart" and "mind" are interchangeable. As the Buddha realized, our mind—the smart part of this psyche we have, the part that figures things out—is not really that much different from the heart, the part that wills. The two work together. Your desires have their reasons. Your reasons are based on desires. So you have to train the whole heart and mind. That was one of the Buddha's insights: that to really develop the mind, to have the discernment that you need in order to see through how you're creating suffering for yourself and suffering for

others, you also have to develop qualities of the good heart. The good mind and the good heart go together.

You look at the list of perfections. Discernment, the perfection focused on the development of the mind, is just one of them. The others all have to do with the good qualities of the heart: generosity, virtue, renunciation, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, and equanimity. In our practice, we have to develop all of these qualities and we have to see the opportunity to develop them as something really precious.

There was one time when Ajaan Fuang was going to lead a group of his students up to the chedi at the monastery in order to meditate. The chedi was the spired monument we had built up on the hill. They got up there and discovered that somebody had created a huge mess. So instead of getting to meditate, they had to clean up the mess. One of the students complained. And Ajaan Fuang said to her, “Look don’t complain. They gave us the opportunity to do some good, to make some merit.” In other words, they gave us the opportunity to do something purposeful. It might not have been what they wanted to do originally, but we can take it as an opportunity to do something good.

We’re fortunate we live in a place where we can do good things and develop good qualities of the mind. When I was in Switzerland recently, I was going through one of the towns, and two Thai people came running up. They wanted to give me a donation. They’d been living in Switzerland for quite a while and had no opportunity to make merit. They didn’t know me. They didn’t know whether I was a reliable monk or not. They just wanted to make merit because living in that society they didn’t see any opportunity to do so. Actually, the opportunities were there. There were ways in which they could be helpful to other people, but it wasn’t quite the kind of goodness that they wanted to develop. They wanted to develop something that was related to the Dhamma.

And you see this in all people who have been properly raised. They look around for opportunities to do good.

I was reading a study a while back about how people who find happiness in life tend to be the ones who, as children, did a lot of chores around the house. It appears that there’s a certain age where kids want to help with the work around the house, and in societies where they’re discouraged, like modern society, they’re turned into consumers and they’re miserable. Whereas in societies in which they’re encouraged—even though they’re sloppy at the beginning, they don’t quite do things right, but their desire to help is honored—they have a sense of their own self worth, which is not based on gold stars placed on their exam papers. It’s based on the knowledge that they’ve done something to help other people.

They've made a contribution. In Buddhist terms, they've developed their perfections.

So as we live in this monastery, where we do have time to meditate, remember that that's not all we do 24 hours a day. There are other things that have to be done, too. Look at the other things as part of the practice.

Another study I read some years back was written by a sociologist who was comparing a meditation center back East with a Thai temple back East. And she was talking with one of the people in the meditation center about how it seemed that at the Thai temple people weren't practicing that much. And the woman at the center had the good sense to say, "Well, maybe their practice is not just meditation. There're other things they're doing with their generosity, their virtue, their determination to develop a monastery here in a very unlikely place, i.e., America, and to see it through." It requires endurance. It requires patience. It requires determination, all kinds of good qualities. And all of that is part of the practice.

When you learn how to look at our life here as an opportunity to develop good qualities in the mind, then the difficulties we inevitably run into don't seem so overwhelming or irritating. They're opportunities to develop the perfections, to develop something within us that we can take with us when we go, rather than just the memory of a nice meditation. They develop good habits of the mind. These habits, once they get firmly ensconced in the mind, will see you through all kinds of things.

I had a student back in Thailand who was constantly straining at the bit, wanting to get into the forest. After three years with me, he left and went into the forest. Ultimately, he found himself a nice little hut where he had nothing to do all day long but meditate. He was looking forward to some really great meditation, but for months his mind was scattered all over the place. What kept him going was the realization that even though the meditation wasn't going well, at least he was developing the perfection of endurance, that some day it would see him through. And it did.

So look at everything as an opportunity for the practice. The meditation is an opportunity to develop good qualities of the heart and mind. Our chores around the monastery are opportunities to develop a good heart and a good mind—and the two ideally should go together.

In people with just a good mind but not a good heart, their intelligence can destroy them and destroy other people. A good heart without a good mind can put you in a position where your goodness gets abused. And remember, a good

heart is not just a heart of kindness. It's a heart of endurance. It's a heart of determination, a heart of persistence.

When you think in this way, everything is part of the practice. Everything is a source of nourishment. It may not be the nourishment you wanted at that particular point, but if you learn how to recognize it as an opportunity and not a irritation is good for the mind, good for the heart. It reminds you that you've got a good purpose: You're looking for happiness, which is the desire we all have, but you place some really high standards on what happiness will satisfy you. You want a happiness that's solid, reliable, a happiness that's blameless, a happiness that places no burden on anybody, a happiness that takes you out of the feeding chain. And everything that can help in finding that happiness is all to a good end.