

Quick Dharma Series

Purposeful Purposelessness
by Gyoshin

*A mountain stream:
even the stones make songs -
wild cherry trees.*

—Onitsura 1660-1783

I wake in the morning and think, "what must I do today?" The inevitable list is written. At the end of the day I look back at all the unfinished business and add it to tomorrow's list. Items crossed off my lists are a testimony to purpose and accomplishment. Yet there is a dark side to this obsession — an incompleteness: the burden of things not done.

As each day and each list comes and goes I am left with the uneasy feeling that there must be a better way of being if my tomorrows would not be burdened with as much carryover baggage. However, this seems to be a strategy of regret. In looking back I'm afraid that life might seem emptier: lessened in some way by challenges not met. Of course there is the temptation to make shorter lists or none at all.

For awhile I tried not making a list until the end of the day and then listing only my completed tasks. That way every list was a record of success — nothing left undone. Eventually I gave that up because it seemed like cheating.

The answer to this dilemma always seems to come when I take time to look deeply at mountains, trees, and flowers — that world of nature outside my narrow sense of self. I ask the mountain, "What is your purpose?" The answer, "No purpose." Yet deep within persists a notion that there is purpose here: something unperceived. Perhaps there is hidden purpose on a grander scale. Contemplating this natural world of mountains, trees, and flowers, I begin to expand my narrow sense of self and a deep mystery begins to unfold: the world of nature has "purposeful purposelessness." When I bring this "purposeful purposelessness" into my own daily life the lists are not as oppressive: the regrets fewer. Somehow I feel that Onatsura must have traveled very lightly: a very refreshing way of living.

