

The Meaning of Life, from Confucius to the Dalai Lama

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What is the meaning of Life?

I love questions like this, and this one, this great-grandmother of questions, THIS one is an old friend of mine. Because once upon a time, I wanted to be a philosopher. Aside from the obvious employment challenges such a career entails, I had a marvelous time as a PhD candidate at the University of Maryland many years ago. And I loved the Big Questions. Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going? These were blood in the water, and I was a hungry shark, ready to gobble them all up.

My joy was not shared by my department advisor. His concern was that I didn't really understand the point of a degree program. Enthusiasm was great and all, he said, but what I really needed was a question I could do more than just dance with. I needed something I could analyze, something I could either disassemble or shove into a new direction. The Meaning of Life didn't really fit that bill. because, he argued, what could I add to what the great sages had already said? Perhaps I really ought to tackle something simpler, like the biomechanical implausibility inherent in prevailing solutions to the mind-body problem. It's more interesting than it sounds, but I didn't stick to my guns and eventually decided to get a job teaching IT instead. And if I'm being honest, I've regretted that decision ever since.

Part of what makes me so disappointed is that seeking the meaning of life is not a useless quest. It is the only quest. This is the root and stock of every single great novel, the backdrop of every epic, the one measure by which we ALL measure our lives. Will we measure up? How can we even know if we never learned which measuring stick we were supposed to use? Because

there are a lot of them. Lots and lots of measuring sticks to show us what a meaningful life is or could be.

Author and Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön tells us that we should live our life as an experiment. Sounds good -- so let's play a game. My bet is that if you ask the average person "What is the meaning of Life?", that what you'll get is a blank look or a startled laugh. It'll be as if you asked them about their favorite murderer, or the best paperclip, or a colorless green idea. You don't have to trust me on this one – I'm assigning it as homework.

Sometime over the next week, I want you to ask someone. Not the car next to yours while you're waiting for the light to change, or the person behind you in the checkout line. A friend. Someone you know. Just not over that first cup of coffee – that's just mean – but maybe over a glass of wine, or a meal. See how many of them pull your beverage away from you, as if to say, "hey, I think you've had enough."

To prepare you for those conversations, I propose to add a few unusual measuring sticks to your set of talking points. My thought is that many of us are pretty familiar with answers that are traditionally Western – and this is hardly surprising, because there have been a lot of them. For fun, perhaps that's where we'll go next time.

But THIS time, I'm going to head to China and India and cherry pick four answers to the Question, answers as proposed by Confucius and Lao Tzu, as found in the Bhagavad Gita and as lived by the Dalai Lama. Some of you may find these familiar, and to you, I apologize – I'm going to do my best to do justice to these great traditions in the format we have, which requires oversimplifying. But for anyone interested in looking at the source materials, I am happy to tell you that there are some truly excellent translations available -- I'll make sure they're added to the print version of this text when it goes up on the website.

Confucius and Practice makes Perfect

So, our first visit is to Confucius.

If asked, I think Confucius might have said that the goal of life is effortless. This is not to say that the goal that a good person aims their life towards is easy or easily achieved. Far from it. Effortlessness was that almost unconscious grace and beauty that results from true mastery – whether of dance, of poetry, of martial skill, but most particularly for Confucianism, the rituals of propriety and respect. All of these rituals required skills, skills acquired through endless practice, and that practice crafted a life envisioned much like a gemstone, perfectly cut, finely ground, and constantly polished. The true master, then, would have studied the rituals so intently that they were able to respond effortlessly to any new or unexpected situation. The meaningful life was one that elevated itself through practice. The acts of the worthy life were themselves performance art, elegance achieved through and across a lifetime's practice. And that's our first answer for the meaning of life: Practice makes perfect.

I think many of us in the United States have chosen a path that Confucius would have endorsed – what author Malcolm Gladwell describes as investing the 10,000 hours of practice required to achieve mastery. Whether that's working on a golf swing, diagnosing the sick, making an omelet, or writing a sermon, time and effort can combine to create skills, skills that we can use, perhaps, to start or advance a career. So, what skills do you want to add to your repertoire? How can you make your life more interesting, more intricate, more suffused with the pleasure and satisfaction that effortless mastery might bring?

Taoism and Effortless Being

Our second stop is dao, a word that translates as “way” -- as in, a way of life. It also means “way”, as in, a way of thinking. It also means “way”, as in, “the way the universe is”. Dao

means all of these things, all at the same time. My first thought, hearing that, is that “this sounds complicated”. And it kind of is. But the point that Daoism is trying to make is that I’m trying too hard. And those that are following Confucius? They’re trying WAY too hard. In fact, they have meaningfulness exactly backwards.

When someone is hurt, you don’t need to study a philosopher to learn that all people should help those in need. You don’t need to be taught by your parents that helping is good. You don’t need a Good Samaritan law requiring you to help. You don’t need to follow a set of rules before you can help. The good person just helps. That is “The Way”. The Way is built-in to human nature. We already know how to be. The goal of life, then, is to uncover this now-hidden truth. To strip away the rituals, unwind the laws, forget the teachings, ignore the sages, and get in touch with that deep well of effortless intuition that all the wild creatures were born with. That is where inner peace and harmony lies, where you find true meaningfulness. Don’t think -- in fact, thinking just gets in your way. Just BE. Effortlessly. And that’s our second answer. Just BE.

I think many Americans could probably do with a good bit of Daoist non-thinking. Maybe even some of us. We think, we debate, we analyze, we get lost in the details. John Lennon said that “Life is what happens while you’re busy making other plans”, and maybe that’s a good thing, as we humans have a nasty tendency to lose track of the here and now. As author Alice Morse Earle said: “Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That is why it is called the present.”

Bhagavad Gita: Service & Duty

Our third stop turns to India, where we find the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the major Hindu holy texts. In it, we find the story of a general having doubts about the battle he’s about to fight. The book is a discussion between the general and his charioteer, who just happens to be the god

Krishna. I just want it noted that the next time I have to go into battle on a chariot, I want a god to be MY charioteer.

When it comes to duty, Krishna says, it doesn't matter if you are a priest, a soldier, a laborer, or a peasant. The best that you can ever hope to do is to do whatever it is that you are supposed to do. That's your duty. Yes, it varies according to your social location, your role, your circumstance -- but wherever you are in life, you have obligations. And discharging those obligations to the best of your ability is the best path for karma.

The word, karma translates as "action", where the idea is that all of your actions have consequences. Right actions have good consequences. Wrong actions have bad ones. But every action has consequences. Even if those consequences only apply in a subsequent life – something I'll come back to shortly.

Spoiler alert: Krishna tells the general that good karma is earned through properly discharging one's duty. Bad karma is avoided through discipline. Now you know.

Social justice issues bring a lot of folks to a UU church, and the urge to help others, to do more -- that urge is one that Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi might have welcomed. his understanding of "right action" was expressed as an all-encompassing service to others, a lesson he said he learned from the Bhagavad Gita, a book he said he read often. Following this example, Tulsi Gabbard, a Major in the US Army and the first Hindu elected to US House of Representatives, said: "I chose to take the oath of office with my personal copy of the Bhagavad Gita because its teachings have inspired me to be a servant-leader, dedicating my life in the service of others and to my country." Accept your duty and do it with your whole heart, mind, and strength. And that is our third answer.

Buddhism and the Dalai Lama: Find the Door/Hold the Door

Most of us today are at least familiar with the idea of reincarnation, yes? Right. You're born, you live a while, you die, only to be reborn again. In Indian traditions, you can find yourself a bottle washer in this life. In the next, a butterfly. The next, a bird. The next, a God. And so on and so on, across an infinity of lifetimes, your soul migrating haplessly from one life to the next, with no power to stop, no control over what happens next, and no end. Forever.

At the risk of oversimplifying, I think you can say that Hinduism attempts to tip these scales, seeking out a life that earns more good karma than bad, and maybe the next life will be filled with more rewards than punishments.

Buddhism took a different approach: escape. How? Earn no karma, good or bad, and as a result, break the cycle and win nirvana, a place of perfection, a place beyond suffering, including beyond the suffering of endless death and rebirth. I think we could argue that the Buddhist goal of "ending suffering" is a pretty worthy and meaningful one, but there's an extra step taken by the Dalai Lama that I want to call forward because it's an interesting BLEND of both Hindu and Buddhist thought.

As many of you know, "Dalai Lama" is not a name, but a title. It means, roughly "The Big Guru". The current Dalai Lama is Tenzin, and he is said to be the 14th incarnation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. This word, bodhisattva, refers to those Buddhist masters that have awakened, but have chosen to not leave the cycle of death and rebirth. They have chosen to forsake the rewards of nirvana and return life after life for a single purpose – to help others find their way. Recall the Bhagavad Gita, and the idea of discharging one's duty as based on one's position. Well, in this case, the position is "perfection" and the "duty" is helping everyone else to find their way. For the Bodhisattva, it's not enough to find the door to enlightenment. The duty is

to hold that door open and usher everyone else through before closing it behind them. A Bodhisattva is here as long as we're here. Holding the door, life after life, world without end.

Comedian and TV personality Whoopi Goldberg puts it a slightly more modest way: "We're here for a reason," she said. "I believe a bit of the reason is to throw little torches out to lead people through the dark." And that is our fourth answer.

Summary and Charge

So, here we are. One question. Four cultures. Four responses. Practice makes perfect was one. Just Be was two. Do your duty, three. Hold the door, four. I trust that you are all now adequately prepared to go forth and have your light dinnertime conversations, right? Excellent!

I'm reminded of a pair of photos of church signs that I recently saw on Facebook. The first sign read: "All of Life's Questions ANSWERED Here." The second sign read: "All of Life's Answers QUESTIONED Here." The second sign was a Unitarian Universalist church, and I think that says quite a bit about who we are.

Our Fourth Principle states that we covenant to affirm and promote "the Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning", and our third Source states that we draw "wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life." That's the hope for today. Inspiration. Inspiration to maybe make a change. Not in the world around you. Not ... yet. No, today is about you. A change within. A change that starts with a question. A question of who you want to be. A question about meaning in your life. Whether you have it now, or have it within your grasp, or whether you're going to need to take a few steps to get to that point, it doesn't matter. All that matters, right now, is that you ask the question.

Because our culture has a problem. Truth be told, it has many, but the one I'm looking at is the blithe and unexamined way we structure and spend the time we have. As if that time is

limitless and unimportant. As if it doesn't really matter how we spend any given day. As if we don't have the power to do it differently. As if we shouldn't do it differently.

We UU's have a leg up, I think. Not every one of us is woke, or at least, not woke all the time, but I think that as a group we may be closer to it than many, and for that, I'm grateful. But Monday is coming, and there are more holidays around the corner, and suddenly it'll be a New Year's and once again we'll be talking about our Resolutions and about all of those changes we want to make.

But before all of that, and maybe as a setup for all of that, I invite you to play my game. My bet is that posing the question is going to be hard. It's going to feel weird. But I should confess: I was reluctant to play, too. I left this series of questions in a grad school notebook many years ago and forgot about them. I like to think that these questions didn't forget ME, however, and that they found me during a job transition, and in an act of philosophical mugging, reminded me that asking questions is a great way to start some much-needed trouble. And I've been asking them over and over ever since. And it's liberating.

So, ask your friends "What is the Meaning of Life?" Or, if that's too bold, maybe just ask yourself, "What makes life meaningful?" Maybe try on one of the measuring sticks we looked at today. But be prepared. Unexpected things happen when you ask questions about meaning, about purpose, about life. Good things, perhaps. Maybe uncomfortable things.

Who knows? Maybe you'll change careers. My father-in-law did that four times. Maybe you'll run for office. It's not like we couldn't use some great candidates – and who better? Maybe you'll just have a great conversation. And that's fine too. But maybe that conversation will spark something. Whether it's a great fire in the soul, or even just a little torch, it can be enough to lead others out of the darkness.

May it be so. Good luck and Amen.

Some recommended resources

Courtesy of Amazon Smile links that benefit Frederick County's Religious Coalition of Emergency Human Needs

- [The Analects](#) (Oxford World's Classics) Paperback – August 1, 2008, by Confucius (Author), Raymond Dawson (Translator)
- [Lao-tzu's Taoteching](#) Paperback – November 1, 2009. by Lao Tzu (Author), Red Pine (Translator)
- [The Bhagavad Gita, 2nd Edition](#) Paperback – May 17, 2007, by Eknath Easwaran (Author)
- [For the Benefit of All Beings: A Commentary on the Way of the Bodhisattva](#) (Shambhala Classics) Paperback – April 21, 2009, by Dalai Lama (Author), The Padmakara Translation Group (Translator)