

THE MEANING OF LIFE

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In a serious moment just as now, one asks himself or herself for what purpose is this so imperative, so invincible, so all-compassing an impulse to exist even for a passing hour? Or what is the attraction of “Being” over “Not Being” of life in the crowded and worrying world, which makes it worth the turmoil and the hardship, the anxiety and ceaseless strife? In what consists the satisfaction of an ant’s existence, of a worm’s, or a crocodile’s, we can form no conception. To account for our own passionate attachment to living is not easy.

All the questions man asks about his life are multiplied by the fact of death; for man differs from all other creatures, it would seem, in being aware of his own death, and in never being fully reconciled to sharing the natural fate of all living organisms.

The tree of knowledge, with its apple that gave man awareness of good and evil, also grew a more bitter fruit man wrenched from its branches:- That is the consciousness of the shortness of the individual life and the universality of death.

In his resistance to death man has often achieved a maximum assertion of life; like a child at the sea’s edge, working desperately to build up the walls of his sand castle before the next wave breaks over it, man has often made death the centre of his most valued efforts, cutting temples out of the rock, heaping pyramids high above the desert, building with spires aspiring to the heavens, and thus translating, as it were the ache and longing of human brief concepts of beauty into everlasting stone.

Death happens to all living things, but man alone has created out of the constant threat of death, a will to endure. And out of the desire for continuity and immortality in all their many conceivable forms, man has created religions which in their turn, have attempted to give a more meaningful end to life.

For the Hindu this end is “to be one with Brahma or to be reabsorbed in the divine essence from which he is sprung;” for the Jew, Christian and Mohammedan it is “to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” Although life in these ultimate havens of religion is said to be much happier than life here, the average Hindu, Jew, Christian

or Mohammedan will never willingly give up this life to go to these heavens. And the Buddhist, for whom the best is not to be born, is also in the same company, for he too, clings to earthly existence.

The Greeks had a story of a Phrygian king who sought for long to capture the Satyr Silenus, wise it was said, with supernatural knowledge. At length in the king's gardens in Macedonia, where grew the most fragrant roses in all the world, the Satyr was taken, and brought before the monarch, who put him the question of questions – “what is best and most desirable for men?” For long Silenus was silent. At last, to obtain his release with bitter laughter he replied – “O wretched race of a day, children of chance and misery, why do ye compel me to say to you what it were most expedient for you not to hear? What is best for all is forever beyond your reach; not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. The second best for you, however, is soon to die.”

So the great solution to our problem would be: “what is best for all is not to be born.”

But having been born, his primary hopes and expectations are desire for food, shelter, comfort and security; or in the language of the American Declaration of Independence, “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” The question that faces every man born into this world then is, not what should be the purpose of life, but just what to do with life, a life given to him for a period of, on an average, fifty to sixty years. The answer that he should order his life so that he could find the greatest happiness in it is a more practical question than speculation on the metaphysical proposition of the mystic purpose of life.

The situation then would seem to be this: man wants to live, and he wants to live happily, but he still must live upon this earth.

The natural span of man's existence contains enough to make this life a prize worth living for. Are we satisfied – No, we have within us a greed for life, an urgent craving for immortality. That longing, which lies at the root of some other religions, we Buddhists look upon as a sin of the flesh – one to be conquered and suppressed just as other vices. It is a vice akin to avarice. With its suppression comes a peace which only those who have felt it can realise.

Life for so many people is empty and unsatisfying. Men realise that they are caught in a trap of their own making even after they have had all the good things of

this world. They wish to free themselves, but do not know how. The cry goes up continually “What is life for?” The Scientists answer:-

“Has life purpose: What or where or when?

Out of space came Universe, came sun, came earth,
came life, came man and more must come,

But as to Purpose; Whose or whence? Why, None.”

The Scientists and psychologists have widened our horizons, but they have not given us a purpose. Only religion can do that and it needs to be a religion that is at once logically sound and inspiring in its motif.

Religion is man’s first self-consciousness. This makes it sacred. Unfortunately this is lost sight of by many people who make much ado of Creator Gods and belabour themselves with dogmas and traditional beliefs based on unprovable motifs. And making the consideration of knowable man secondary to the consideration of unknowable so-called creators of man. Love to man must not be derivative but it must be primary. Only then will love become the true, sacred and dependable force. If human essence is the highest essence of man, then love to man practically must be the supreme and first law of man.

Buddhism fulfils these conditions, for it satisfies man’s most profound and lofty aspirations, and yet bears the strain of everyday life and helps him in his contact with his fellow men. The great test of a religion is how far its philosophy can be applied to man’s human problems. Yet these human problems are cosmic, for man is himself a cosmos. The cry of man’s heart for a purpose is the dim recognition of this fact. When a man feels his divine nature quickening to life in his human everyday self, he no longer cries for a purpose of life, for he realises that he is himself that very purpose. “Thou art thyself the object of thy search.” Goethe has said it in the cold sentence, “Let us seek nothing behind the phenomena; they themselves are the lesson.”

This is what the Buddha declared 2,500 years ago, when he had laboured to find the meaning of life, and found it.

“In this very fathom-long body, along with its perceptions and thoughts, do I proclaim the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world.”

- (1) And what is that world in us which we can see for ourselves and requires no God to enlighten us. It is this: - that life is suffering of all sorts due to birth, decay, disease and death.
- (2) By the origin of the world in us is meant the cause of our suffering. It does not require a very great stretch of imagination on our part to realise that this cause is craving or attachment. It is a powerful mental force transcending death. It explains our present, past and future births.

Right understanding of these truths lead to eradication of this craving and to the formation of proper mental attitudes towards the external objects of sense, - in other words to live without craving or attachment.

- (3) The cessation of the world in us is to be understood as the realisation of the complete eradication of craving and the complete renunciation of not only external objects but actually the renouncing of internal attachment to the objects of sense. Though dependent on oneself it is beyond logical reasoning and is supra-mundane. This is what we Buddhists call Nibbana.
- (4) The Lord Buddha discovered for us eight equally powerful forces to help us overcome this single foe craving and that is what is known as the noble eightfold path, the via media or golden mean. It is called via media because it avoids 2 extremes. Indulgence in sensual pleasures which are low and worldly; and self-torture in the form of severe asceticism which is painful and low.

The eight forces are:-

In the Wisdom Group

Right Understanding
Right Thought

In the Virtue Group

Right Speech
Right Action
Right Livelihood

In the Concentration Group

Right Effort
Right Mindfulness
Right Concentration

The practice of these forces roots out the craving for existence destroys that which leads to renewed becoming and there is no more coming to be. We live to experience the cessation of the 3 root causes of evil, namely greed, hatred and delusion or ignorance. This is Buddhist deliverance. We crave not to go to heaven or any other world, although we believe in the existence of other worlds, good and bad, besides our own; because we know that anything achieved or born of our craving is impermanent. Our *Somnum bonum* is Nibbana which we strive for and are confident that if we do not achieve it right in this birth, we shall do so some day later in a future birth or births.