

THE MEANING OF LIFE

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What is the meaning of life?

Who? Whence? Whither? Why?

What? Are some important problems that affect all humanity.

Who is man? is our first question.

Let us proceed with what is self-evident and perceptible to all.

Man possesses a body which is seen either by our senses or by means of apparatus. This material body consists of forces and qualities which are in a state of constant flux.

Scientists find it difficult to define what matter is. Certain philosophers define “matter as that in which proceed the changes called motion and motion as those changes which proceed in matter.”¹

The Pali term for matter is Rupa. It is explained as that which changes or disintegrates. That which manifests itself is also another explanation.

According to Buddhism there are four fundamental material elements. They are *Pathavi*, *Apo*, *Tejo* and *Vayo*.

Pathavi means the element of extension, the substratum of matter. Without it, objects cannot occupy space. The qualities of hardness and softness which are purely relative are two conditions of this element. This element of extension is present in earth, water, fire and air. For instance, water above is supported by water below. It is this element of extension in conjunction with the element of motion (*Vayo*) that produces the upward pressure.

Apo is the element of cohesion. Unlike *Pathavi* it is intangible. It is this element which enables the scattered atoms of matter to cohere and thus gives us the idea of body.

1. Ouspensky - *Tertium Organum* p. 8.

Tejo is the element of heat. Cold is also a form of *Tejo*. Both heat and cold are included in *Tejo* because they possess the power of maturing bodies, or, in other words, the vitalizing energy. Preservation and decay are due to this element.

Vayo is the element of motion. The movements are caused by this element. Motion is regarded as the force or the generator of heat. Both motion and heat in the material realm correspond respectively to consciousness and Kamma in the mental.

These four powerful forces are inseparable and interrelated, but one element may preponderate over another, as for instance, the element of extension preponderates earth, cohesion in water, heat in fire and motion, and air.

Thus, matter consists of forces and qualities which constantly change not remaining the same even for two consecutive moments. According to Buddhism matter endures only for 17 thought-moments,² while scientists tell us that matter endures only for 10-27th of a second.

At the moment of birth, according to biology, man inherits from his parents an infinitesimally minute cell 30 millionth part of an inch across. "In the course of nine months this speck grows to a living bulk 15,000 million times greater than it was at outset."³ This tiny chemico-physical cell is the physical foundation of man.

According to Buddhism sex is also determined at the moment of conception.

Combined with matter there is another important factor in this complex machinery of man. It is the mind. As such it pleases some learned writers to say that man is not Mind plus Body, but is a Mind-Body. Scientists declare that life emerges from matter and mind from life. But they do not give us a satisfactory explanation with regard to the development of the mind.

Unlike the material body immaterial mind is invisible, but it could be sensed directly. An old couplet runs:-

"What is mind? No matter"

"What is matter? Never mind":

2. During the time occupied by a flash of lightning billions and billions of thought-moments may arise.

3. Sir Charles Sherrington *Life's Unfolding* p. 32.

We are aware of our thoughts and feelings and so forth by direct sensation, and we infer their existence in others by analogy.

There are several Pali terms for mind. *Mana*, *Citta*, *Vinnana* are the most noteworthy of them. Compare the Pali root *man*, to think, with the English word man and the Pali word *Manussa* which means he who has a developed consciousness.

In Buddhism no distinction is made between mind and consciousness. Both are used as synonymous terms. Mind may be defined as simply the awareness of an object since there is no agent or a soul that directs all activities. It consists of fleeting mental states which constantly arise and perish with lightning rapidity. "With birth for its source and death for its mouth it persistently flows on like a river receiving from the tributary streams of sense constant accretions to its flood." Each momentary consciousness of this ever-changing life-stream, on passing away, transmits its whole energy, all the indelibly recorded impressions, to its successor. Every fresh consciousness therefore consists of the potentialities of its predecessors and something more. As all impressions are indelibly recorded in this ever-changing palimpsest-like mind, and as all potentialities are transmitted from life to life, irrespective of temporary physical disintegrations, reminiscence of past births or past incidents becomes a possibility. If memory depends solely on brain cells, it becomes an impossibility.

Like electricity mind is both a constructive and destructive powerful force. It is like a double-edged weapon that can equally be used either for good or evil. One single thought that arises in this invisible mind can even save or destroy the world. One such thought can either populate or depopulate a whole country. It is mind that creates one's heaven. It is mind that creates one's hell.

Ouspensky writes:- "Concerning the latent energy contained in the phenomena of consciousness, i.e. in thoughts, feelings, desires, we discover that its potentiality is even more immeasurable, more boundless. From personal experience, from observation, from history, we know that ideas, feelings, desires, manifesting themselves, can liberate enormous quantities of energy, and create infinite series of phenomena. An idea can act for centuries and millenniums and only grows and deepens, evoking ever new series of phenomena, liberating ever fresh energy. We know that thoughts continue to live and act when even the very name of the man who created them has been converted into a myth, like the names of the founders of ancient religions, the creators of the immortal poetical works of antiquity-heroes, leaders and

prophets. Their words are repeated by innumerable lips, their ideas are studied and commented upon.

"Undoubtedly each thought of a poet contains enormous potential force, like the power confined in a piece of coal or in a living cell, but infinitely more subtle, imponderable and potent."¹

Observe for instance, the potential force that lies in the following significant words of the Buddha:-

Mano-pubbangama dhamma - mano settha mano maya.

Mind fore-runs deeds; mind is chief, and mind-made are they.

Mind or consciousness, according to Buddhism, arises at the very moment of conception, together with matter. Consciousness is therefore present in the foetus. This initial consciousness, technically known as rebirth-consciousness or relinking consciousness (*Patisandhi vinnana*), is conditioned by past kamma of the person concerned. The subtle mental, intellectual, and moral differences exist amongst mankind are due to this Kamma conditioned consciousness, second factor of man.

To complete the trio that constitutes man there is a third factor, the phenomenon of life that vitalizes both mind and matter. Due to the presence of life reproduction becomes possible. Life manifests itself both in physical and mental phenomena. In Pali the two forms of life are termed *Namajivitindriya* and *Rupajivitindriya* — psychic and physical life.

Matter, mind, and life are therefore the three distinct factors that constitute man. With their combination a powerful force known as man with inconceivable possibilities comes into being. He becomes his own creator and destroyer. In him are found a rubbish-heap of evil and a store-house of virtue. In him are found the worm, the brute, the man, the superman, the deva, the Brahma. Both criminal tendencies and saintly characteristics are dormant in him. He may either be a blessing or a curse to himself and others. In fact man is a world by himself.

Whence? is our second question.

How did man originate?

1. Ouspensky – *Tertium Organum* p. 125

Either three must be a beginning for man or three cannot be a beginning. Those who belong to the first school postulate a first cause, whether as a cosmic force or as an Almighty Being. Those who belong to the second school deny a first cause for, in common experience, the cause ever becomes the effect and the effect becomes the cause. In a circle of cause and effect a first cause is inconceivable. According to the former life has had a beginning; while according to the latter it is beginningless. In the opinion of some the conception of a first cause is as ridiculous as a round triangle.

According to the scientific standpoint, man is the direct product of the sperm and ovum cells provided by his parents. Scientists while asserting '*Omne vivum ex vivo*' — all life from life, maintain that mind and life evolved from the lifeless.

Now, from the scientific standpoint, man is absolutely parent-born. As such life precedes life. With regard to the origin of the first protoplasm of life, or 'colloid' (whichever we please to call it), scientists plead ignorance.

According to Buddhism man is born from the matrix of action (*kammayoni*). Parents merely provide man with a material layer. As such being precedes being. At the moment of conception, it is Kamma that conditions the initial consciousness that vitalizes the foetus. It is this invisible Kammic energy generated from the past birth that produces mental phenomena and the phenomenon of life in an already extant physical phenomenon, to complete the trio that constitutes man.

Dealing with the conception of beings the Buddha states:—

Where three are found in combination, there a germ of life is planted. If mother and father come together, but it is not the mother's period, and the 'being-to-be-born' (*gandhabba*) is not present, then no germ of life is planted. If mother and father come together, and it is the mother's period, but the 'being-to-be-born' is not present, then again no germ of life is planted. If mother and father come together, and it is the mother's period, and the being-to-be-born is also present, then, by the combination of these three, a germ of life is there planted."

Here Gandhabba (=gantabba) refers to a suitable being ready to be born in that particular womb. This term is used only in this particular connection, and must not be mistaken for a permanent soul.

For a being to be born here a being must die somewhere. The birth of a being corresponds to the death of a being in a past life; just as, in conventional terms, the rising of the sun in one place means the setting of the sun in another place.

The Buddha states - “a first beginning of beings who, obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving, wander and fare on, is not to be perceived.”

This life-stream flows *ad infinitum* as long as it is fed with the muddy waters of ignorance and craving. When these two are completely cut off, then only does the life-stream cease to flow; rebirth ends as in the case of Buddhas and Arahats. An ultimate beginning of this life-stream cannot be determined, as a stage cannot be perceived when this life-force was not fraught with ignorance and craving.

The Buddha has here referred merely to the beginning of the life-stream of living beings. It is left to scientists to speculate on the origin and the evolution of the universe.

Whither? is our third question.

Where goes man?

According to ancient materialism which, in Pali and Sanskrit, is known as Lokayata, man is annihilated after death, leaving behind him any force generated by him. "Man is composed of four elements. When man dies the earthly element returns and relapses into the earth: the watery element returns into the water; the fiery element returns into the fire; the airy element returns into the air; the senses pass into space. Wise and fools alike, when the body dissolves, are cut off, perish, do not exist any longer. There is no other world. Death is the end of all. This present world alone is real. The so-called eternal heaven and hell are the inventions of imposters."¹

Materialists believe only in what is cognizable by the senses. As such matter alone is real. The ultimate principles are the four elements earth, water, fire and air. The self-conscious life mysteriously springs forth from them, just as the genie makes its appearance when Aladdin rubs his lamp. The brain secretes thought just as liver secretes bile.

In the view of materialists the belief in the other world, as Sri Radhakrishna states, "is a sign of mendaciousness, feminism, weakness, cowardice and dishonesty".

1. Sri Radhakrishna — Indian Philosophy, Vol. 1 p. 278.

According to Christianity there is no past for man. The present is only a preparation for two eternities of heaven and hell. Whether they are viewed as places or states man has for his future endless felicity in heaven or endless suffering in hell. Man is therefore not annihilated after death, but his essence goes to eternity.

"Whoever," as Schopenhauer says, "regards himself as having become out of nothing must also think that he will again become nothing; for that an eternity has passed before he was, and then a second eternity had begun, through which he will never cease to be, is a monstrous thought."

The adherents of Hinduism who believe in a past and present do not state that man is annihilated after death. Nor do they say that man is eternalized after death. They believe in an endless series of past and future births. In their opinion the life-stream of man flows *ad infinitum* as long as it is propelled by the force of Kamma, one's actions. In due course the essence of man may be reabsorbed in the Ultimate Reality (*Paramatma*) from which his soul emanated.

Buddhism believes in the present. With the present as the basis it argues the past and future. Just as an electric light is the outward manifestation of invisible electric energy even so man is merely the outward manifestation of an invisible energy known as Kamma. The bulb may break, and the light may be extinguished, but the current remains and the light may be reproduced in another bulb. In the same way the Kammic force remains undisturbed by the disintegration of the physical body, and the passing away of the present consciousness leads to the arising of a fresh one in another birth. Here the electric current is like the Kammic force, and the bulb may be compared to the egg-cell provided by the parents.

Past Kamma conditions the present birth; and present Kamma in combination with past Kamma, conditions the future. The present is the offspring of the past, and becomes in turn the parent of the future.

Death is therefore not the complete annihilation of man, for though that particular life span ended, the force which hitherto actuated it is not destroyed.

After death the life-flux of man continues *ad infinitum* as long as it is fed with the waters of ignorance and craving. In conventional terms man need not necessarily be born as a man because humans are not the only living beings.

Moreover, earth, an almost insignificant speck in the universe, is not the only place in which he will seek rebirth. He may be born in other habitable planes as well.²

If man wishes to put an end to this repeated series of births, he can do so as the Buddha and Arahats have done by realizing Nibbana, the complete cessation of all forms of craving.

Where does man go? He can go wherever he wills or likes if he is fit for it. If, with no particular wish, he leaves his path to be prepared by the course of events, he will go to the place or state he fully deserves in accordance with his Kamma.

Why? is our last question.

Why is man? Is there a purpose in life?

This is rather a controversial question.

What is the materialistic point of view?

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,"*

As materialists confine themselves purely to sense-data and the present material welfare ignoring all spiritual values, they hold a view diametrically opposite to that of moralist. In their opinion there is no purposer — hence there cannot be a purpose. Atheists, to which category belong Buddhists as well, do not believe in a creative purposer.

"Who colours wonderfully the peacocks, or who makes the cuckoos coo so well?" This is one of the chief arguments of the materialists to attribute everything to the natural order of things.

2. "There are about 1,000,000 planetary systems in the Milky Way in which life may exist."
See Fred Hoyle, *The Nature of the Universe* pp. 87-89.

"Eat, drink, and be merry, for death comes to all, closing our lives," appears to be the ethical ideal of their system. In their opinion, as Sri Radhakrishna writes "Virtue is a delusion and enjoyment is the only reality. Death is the end of life. Religion is a foolish aberration, a mental disease. There was a distrust of everything good, high, pure, and compassionate. The theory stands for sensualism and selfishness and the gross affirmation of the loud will. There is no need to control passion and instinct since they are nature's legacy to men."¹

Sarvadarsana Sangraha says:-

"While life is yours, live joyously,
None can escape Death's searching eye;
When once this frame of ours they burn,
How shall it e'er again return?"²

"While life remains let a man live happily, let him feed on ghee even though he runs in debt."

Now let us turn towards science to get a solution to the question why.

It should be noted that "science is a study of things, a study of what is and that religion is a study of ideals, a study of what should be".

Sir J. Arthur Thompson maintains that science is incomplete because it cannot answer the question why.

Dealing with Cosmic Purpose, Bertrand Russell states three kinds of views — theistic, pantheistic, and emergent. "The first," he writes, "holds that God created the world and decreed the laws of nature because he foresaw that in time some good would be evolved. In this view purpose exists consciously in the mind of the Creator, who remains external to His creation.

"In the pantheistic form, God is not external to the universe, but is merely the universe considered as a whole. There cannot therefore be an act of creation, but there is a kind of creative force in the universe, which causes it to develop according to a plan which this creative force may be said to have had in mind throughout the process".

1. Indian Philosophy Vol. I. p. 2012.

2. P. 2.

"In the 'emergent' form the purpose is more blind. At an earlier stage, nothing in the universe foresees a later stage, but a kind of blind impulsion leads to those changes which bring more developed forms into existence, so that, in some rather obscure sense, the end is implicit in the beginning."³

We offer no comments. These are merely the views of different religionists and great thinkers.

Whether there is a cosmic purpose or not a question arises as to the usefulness of the tapeworm, snakes, mosquitoes and so forth, and for the existence of rabies. How does one account for the problem of evil? Are earthquakes, floods, pestilences, and wars designed?

Expressing his own view about Cosmic Purpose, Russell boldly declares:-
"Why, in any case, this glorification of man? How about lions and tigers? They destroy fewer animals or human lives than we do, and they are much more beautiful than we are. How about ants? They manage the Corporate State much better than any Fascist. Would not a world of nightingales and larks and deer be better than our human world of cruelty and injustice and war? The believers in cosmic purpose make much of our supposed intelligence, but their writings make one doubt it. If I were granted omnipotence, and millions of years to experiment in, I should not think Man much to boast of as the final result of all my efforts."⁴

What is the purpose of life according to different religions?

According to Hinduism the purpose of life is "to be one with Brahma" or "to be re-absorbed in the Divine Essence from which his soul emanated."

According to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it is "to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever."

Will an average person of any religion be prepared to give up his earthly life, to which he tenaciously clings, for immortality in their ultimate havens of peace?

Very doubtful, indeed!

Now, how does Buddhism answer the question why?

3. Bertrand Russell, *Religion and Science* p. 191.

4. Bertrand Russell, *Religion and Science* p. 221.

Buddhism denies the existence of a Creator. As such from a Buddhist point of view there cannot be a fore-ordained purpose. Nor does Buddhism advocate fatalism, determinism, or pre-destination which controls man's future independent of his free actions. In such a case freewill becomes an absolute force and life becomes purely mechanistic.

To a large extent man's actions are more or less mechanistic, being influenced by his own doings, upbringing, environment and so forth. But to a certain extent man can exercise his freewill. A person, for instance, falling from a cliff will be attracted to the ground just as an inanimate stone would. In this case he cannot use his freewill although he has a mind unlike the stone. If he were to climb a cliff, he could certainly use his freewill and act as he likes. A stone, on the contrary, is not free to do so of its own accord. Man has the power to choose between right and wrong, good and bad. Man can either be hostile or friendly to himself and others. It all depends on his mind and its development.

Although there is no specific purpose in man's existence, yet man is free to have some purpose in life.

What, therefore, is the meaning of life?

Ouspensky writes:- "Some say that the meaning of life is in service, in the surrender of self, in self-sacrifice, in the sacrifice of everything, even life itself. Others declare that the meaning of life is in the delight of it, relieved against 'the expectation of the final horror of death.' Some say that the meaning of life is in perfection, and the creation of a better future beyond the grave, or in future life for ourselves. Others say that the meaning of life is in the approach to non-existence; still others, that the meaning of life is in the perfection of the race, in the organization of life on earth; while there are those who deny the possibility of even attempting to know its meaning."

"Criticising all these views the learned writer says:- The fault of all these explanations consists in the fact that they all attempt to discover the meaning of life outside of itself, either in the nature of humanity, or in some problematical existence beyond the grave, or again in the evolution of the Ego throughout many successive incarnations — always in something outside of the present life of man. But if instead of thus speculating about it, men would simply look within themselves, then they would see that in reality the meaning of life is not after all so obscure. It consists in knowledge".

In the opinion of a Buddhist, the meaning of life is Supreme Enlightenment (*Sambodhi*), i.e. understanding of oneself as one really is. This may be achieved

through sublime conduct, mental culture, and penetrative insight; or in other words, through service and perfection.

In service are included boundless loving-kindness, compassion, and absolute selflessness which prompt man to be of service to others. Perfection embraces absolute purity and absolute wisdom.