

# *Giving Meaning to Life*

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There are passages in the texts where the Buddha gives a pretty bleak picture of life and the world at large. Like that chant just now: “The world just passes away. There is no one in charge. It’s a slave to craving.” In other words, there is no grand design to give meaning to life or the world. Things are simply driven by blind craving. There is another passage where the Buddha talks about the way beings wander on in this world. It’s like throwing a stick up into the air. Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end, sometimes it lands splat in the middle. No real pattern. No real direction. This doesn’t mean that life is hopeless. But it means simply that life doesn’t have a meaning unless you give it a meaning. So that’s the real question. It’s not what is the meaning of life, the question is: What kind of meaning do you want to give to it?

This is where the practice comes in, because the practice gives direction. You want to understand the mind so you can understand why it is that even though everything we do is aimed at producing happiness, we often end up causing suffering, pain, and disappointment instead. Why is that? And as the Buddha pointed out, it’s within our power to learn, to understand why. That quest to learn and to understand is what gives meaning to life, gives direction to life in a way that nothing else can.

You look at the things that people try to accomplish in life, in the world outside. The world seems designed to just grind everything down. You want this kind of relationship, but the relationship just falls apart. You want to develop a nice strong body, well, it gets strong for a while, then it starts getting sick, then it gets old, and you’re left with nothing. You want to accomplish something large in the world, but then the economy collapses. War comes. Famine comes. All kinds of things can happen. So looking to the world for meaning is a frustrating, very frustrating experience.

But when you look inside for meaning, you find that there is a lot to learn, there is a lot to understand. Things do get accomplished. As you work on the path, you begin to see how the mind creates a thought world and you realize that you have the choice to go into that thought world or not. As you develop more and more mindfulness, more and more alertness, you understand these processes

of the mind. Through understanding them, you can free yourself from them. You don't have to be their slave. The world that's a slave to craving: You don't have to get into that world.

As the Buddha said, the process of learning about these things is not accompanied by disappointment and sorrow. It's accompanied by joy, a sense of release that comes when you realize that you've been doing something really stupid for a long, long time, and now you've seen through it. You've understood it. You've gone beyond it. You really can cut through and free yourself from the defilements of the mind. When the path comes together in the mind, you see on the one hand that there is such a thing as the Deathless, and on the other hand that you've attained it through mastering your own intentions, understanding the process of the mind. There is more to experience than simply the conditioned and fabricated things we normally experience. That right there cuts through a lot of fetters.

It's like cutting off your arm, which may not be a pretty idea, but once the arm is cut off, it's off. And even though the doctors may try to sew it back on, it's never quite the same. There is such a thing as a permanent change. And even without getting to the noble attainments, you find that having more mastery and more understanding over the processes of the mind puts you in a much better position. You understand yourself better. You cause less suffering for yourself. You understand other people better, and cause them less suffering as well.

So this is a project that's really worth giving your life to. And it gives meaning to your life. It gives a direction to your life. You develop a new relationship to yourself. Ultimately you get to the point where you don't need a sense of identity. But in the meantime you develop a skillful sense. There is a sense of self-esteem that comes with knowing that you can learn. No matter how old you are, no matter how little or how much time is left to your life, you can still learn.

The issue came up a while back: People who are really driven to accomplish things, really driven to develop a sense of self around their accomplishments, are noticing that that causes a lot of stress, a lot of pain and anxiety. But the answer is not to have no accomplishments, or to have no desire for accomplishments. The answer lies, first, in really getting a strong sense of what is a genuine accomplishment in life, and second, gaining a skillful sense of yourself around the process of trying to attain that accomplishment.

What this comes down to is two things: The first is having a willingness to learn. If that's where your sense of identity, your self-esteem is focused, it's skillful. The gain the ability to look at something you've done and realize that

there may be something wrong here, but that doesn't have to threaten your identity. It just calls forth your desire to learn more about what did you do wrong, why was it wrong, what could you do in the future not to repeat that mistake. A second aspect of this more skillful sense of self is a sense of self that understands what's an important question: what's an issue that's worth pursuing and what are the issues you don't really have to pursue.

Here again, the practice gives you a good strong direction. Any issue related to why there is suffering and what you can do to put an end to it: That's an important issue. You hear about people who are suddenly told by their doctors they have, say, three months or three weeks to live, and they suddenly develop a very strong sense of what they really want out of the remainder of their life. They clear away all the distractions and focus on what's really important. And it's good that they do that, but it's sad that they had to wait for a death sentence before they do. We have to remember we are all here with a death sentence. It's simply that we don't have the days marked out for us, how much longer it's going to be. But we do know that we have a limited amount of time, yet we tend to forget that. We act as if we didn't know.

So keep that in mind. Death is down the line. Maybe even before death, illness will come and make it more and more difficult to practice. So the question is: What are the really important things you want to take care of while you've still got the chance? This is the big issue: looking at your own actions to see where they cause suffering and stress, and to figure out how you can act in a way that doesn't. And the skills you learn in the process of focusing on that important issue will serve you in good stead all the way through aging, all the way through illness, and all the way through death. The ability to keep your mind focused on what's important and to put aside unimportant things, the willingness to learn all the time--those abilities will always serve you in good stead.

So this is how we give meaning to life: finding an issue that gives direction and focuses on the really important problems in life, that has the potential to take us to someplace where real changes can be made, changes that make a true difference. It's one of the reasons why Dharma practice is something you really can give your life to, because it gives meaning back to your life.