

The Meaning of Life through Eastern Perspectives

- I. What do we mean by the phrase, “The Meaning of Life”?**
 - A. At least 3 definitions of the word meaning**
 - 1. It’s linguistic or semantic definition – the word “red”**
 - 2. It’s indicative – “those clouds mean rain.”**
 - 3. Significance – “that memorial has a lot of meaning”**
 - B. Does life have meaning in the first place?**
 - C. What is it beyond our mere existence that gives our lives significance?**
 - D. If some lives have significance, are more meaningful than others, whose may be meaningless, then what makes a life worth living? What makes some lives more meaningful than others?**
 - E. Why do we ask the question in the first place? Humans are fundamentally aware of our finitude in a vast universe, that our lives are very short in the span of history. So what does it matter?**
 - F. What is it that makes us characteristically human?**
 - 1. Biology, DNA, our pre-frontal cortex**
 - 2. Psychological – how we think and reason**
 - 3. Moral – we have a conscience, know right from wrong**
 - 4. Spiritual – we have a relationship with a deity**
 - G. We may say that life is meaningful only to the extent that a person does something with it.**
 - 1. Is everything completely determined?**
 - 2. Do we have free will?**
 - 3. A combination of the two.**
 - H. There are two dimensions when we pose the questions**
 - 1. The individual or personal one – a life of reason, faith, part of nature, independent, a member of society.**
 - 2. The collective or social one – our relationship to others, to other groups, and to the broader world.**
- II. The Bhagavad-Gita - Hindu perspective**
 - A. 1. Everyone does battle every day on the field of sacred duty. The battle is between convention and higher duty, between order and chaos, between individual desire and understanding one’s place in the universe. We are constantly faced with moral, existential choices – genuine conflicts between important values.**
 - 2. If we don’t understand how to make those choices, we can’t make meaning out of our life. We are all the authors of our actions, and therefore the idea of living a meaningful life is under our control. We can’t control a lot of things, so focus on your actions, that you can control. The metaphor of the arrow is that you cannot control the arrow after it leaves your bow.**
 - B. 1. Genuine control comes from discipline. We must exercise discipline to constrain ourselves and focus on what is important. Focus on the**

permanent and universal, not the temporary or ephemeral. Discipline comes from three sources, the discipline of action, but it needs the discipline of knowledge, in the context of the discipline of devotion-surrendering ourselves to the order of the cosmos.

2. You have certain duties because of your station in life – a man or woman, father or mother, owner, manager, doctor, etc. We cannot shirk our duties. There is much we can't control, but we can control our actions. You have duties to family, immediate society, country, world.

C. We must pay attention to the interconnectedness of the cosmos as a whole. We gain significance in our lives through our relationship to the whole. Whatever we do, think, or say we should be conscious of the wholes of which we are a part – family, corporation, city, nation, universe. These wholes give our life significance and only by thinking of ourselves in relation to them, can we consider our lives to be more than a minor temporary distraction in the history of the universe. Each life has its place.

III. The Confucian Perspective

- A. This aims to cultivate individual excellence in a social framework. The ideal, cultured person develops humanity, virtue, moral correctness and ritual propriety. He has respect for family and especially elders. These accomplishments of character are achieved through proper training and practice.**
- B. This cultivation supports a social order grounded in the family and then expanded to well-ordered social institutions, including national government.**
- C. Maintaining order in the family produces a harmonious society, which reflects the cosmic order.**
- D. The aim is to produce a good life that is beautiful and aesthetic, yet acted out in a spontaneous, almost effortless way.**

IV. The Daoist Perspective

This means the way of life in harmony with the way of the universe. The way things are.

- A. This calls for spontaneous living – the opposite of Confucianism. Culture gets in our way and inhibits our natural state. Criticism of Confucian ritualism. The Dao is a way of life – it is also a Dao of thought and speech, and the way we should live.**
- B. The emphasis is on nature not culture. The best life is a simple life, lived in harmony with the universe. To the Daoist, the Confucian way is the most fossilized, least natural form of interaction.**
- C. The universe doesn't care about you. It is not rational or benevolent. When your work is done, retire. When you are finished, when you have done enough, step aside – for others to continue.**
- D. Three Daoist principles**
 - 1. Harmony with the universe**

2. Embrace impermanence – death
 3. Appreciation of human vs. the cosmic scale
- V. The Buddhist Perspective
- A. There are three fundamental ideas of Buddhist philosophy and teaching
 1. Impermanence – all things and phenomena are impermanent
 - a. Gross impermanence – things change and grow old and die over time
 - b. Subtle impermanence – everything constantly changes from minute to minute. You and I from one hour ago to now. We and everything are continuously changing, not solid things that persist.
 2. Selflessness – two types
 - a. Selflessness of the person – because we are constantly changing, we are not a permanent identity.
 - b. Selflessness of phenomena – things are constantly changing and have no permanent identity.
 3. Interdependence – of everything in the universe
 - a. Causal interdependence – everything that happens depends on causes and conditions
 - b. Mereological – the whole is dependent on its parts and vice versa.
 - c. Conceptual imputation – we make an identity for everything by putting them in conceptual categories.
 - B. The Four Noble Truths – for those who would be noble
 1. All is suffering, it is universal – 3 kinds of causes
 - a. Gross pain and unpleasantness
 - b. Suffering caused by constant change – age and death
 - c. Suffering of pervasive conditioning because we live in a world of uncertainty, where causes and conditions are out of our control
 2. Desire is a cause of suffering – attraction and aversion. These are caused by primal confusion and basic ignorance. Inability to recognize that things are impermanent and interdependent. Letting go of desire can minimize or eliminate suffering.
 3. Release from suffering – eliminate primal ignorance. We can't eliminate pain or change, but we can eliminate the suffering that they bring by elimination of our confusion about these things and ourselves.
 4. The prescription for removing this confusion is the Eightfold Path. Three principal domains.

- a. **Action (ethical conduct) Right action, right livelihood, right speech**
 - b. **Thought (achieving wisdom) Right views, right meditation**
 - c. **Mindfulness (mental development) Right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration**
- C. Santideva - a sage who says the highest goal is to become a bodhisatva – a person who has attained full awakening or buddhahood and uses his or her life to benefit other humans. He stresses mindfulness – that you can't control the world, but you can control how you react to it. The metaphor: The world is full of thorns, glass, nails and sharp rocks. We can either cover the whole world with a sheet of leather, so we can walk on it – or we can put leather on our shoes to walk on it.**

VI. Zen Buddhism

- 1. This emphasizes direct experience and meditation as opposed to study of sacred texts.. No dependence on words or scripture, but direct communication with the mind, person to person. Seeing into one's own nature to attain enlightenment. A fully awakened life, a life worth leading, is a life in which you understand your own nature, your own mind. Thus in Zen you use non-verbal means – art, poetry, flower arranging to transform your self-identity.**
- 2. Impermanence is more important in Zen. Our mind is subtly impermanent – our thoughts change from moment to moment. Because of our fear of death, we mask the experience of impermanence with thoughts, conception, actions – creating a layer between ourselves and reality - between us and our experience.**
- 3. We tend to suppress our awareness of impermanence. Therefore we live in a dream world that is meaningless, even though we have the reality of a beautiful impermanent world in front of us. It is our nature. Impermanence is no tragedy; it is reality. It is exactly what makes our existence possible.**
- 4. The goal of Zen practice, like all Buddhism, is to become fully awakened, to lead a life in awareness of who we are, what is our duty, who is around us, and to be mindfully effective – for our lives to be fully meaningful.**

VII. Gandhi

- A. He criticizes modernity. He believes liberalism and individual freedom leads to capitalism, consumerism, accumulation of wealth and power that subverts democracy.**
- B. He says that we have a duty as a member of society to service and to bring our society into line with our values. A meaningful life involves our discharge of that duty.**
- C. Justice and public political duties are very important to Gandhi. He believes one should lead a supernatural life in alleviating suffering and**

obtaining political liberation. A life led in service and discipline connects us to something broader – to our fellow humans and to genuine equality. This is the kind of life that serves the highest good, and is therefore most meaningful.

VIII. The Dalai Lama

A. He combines classical, modernist and post-modernist thoughts.

1. He holds the classical Buddhist idea of interdependence, especially a social one. He agrees that happiness or flourishing is the highest good.

2. He holds the modernist views of secular, religious individual freedom and the importance of science.

3. He also agrees with the post-modernist that suffering and confusion come from consumer capitalism, mass advertising, and a drive to buy and own more things.

A. For our lives to be meaningful they must be grounded in reality and an appreciation of interdependence as fundamental in that reality. Interconnection with others also adds to our happiness because so much of our happiness is social. Thus we must develop a deep compassion and commitment to the creation of happiness.

B. Reflect on our selflessness and take our importance less seriously. Cultivate generosity and detachment from our possessions. Develop patience with others and ourselves. He emphasizes a universal responsibility for the welfare of all – because there are no limits on compassion.

4. Thich Nhat Hanh – A Vietnamese Buddhist monk

A. No death, no fear. Life is a continuation of birth or coming into being – becoming manifest, being conscious, acting, and speaking – then passing on into another manifestation. We have the genes, traditions, experiences, and words of our ancestors manifested in us. They are not truly dead. Likewise, we will pass ours onto generations that follow us. Nothing is completely lost when life is over. Nothing is created out of nothing. Even the stars that seem to be so vast and long-lasting have a beginning and a time of being, and finally death. But – in that the death the star spews out its energy and elements – to become the seeds for the births of other stars.

B. Thich Nhat Hanh says not to dwell on the past for it is gone and can never be regained or repeated. Also

don't waste time thinking about the future, for it is determined by the present. You can act only now and in this place. So always – when there is stress or turmoil, or indecision in your life – think: You are in the here and now. That is so calming to my mind and emotions – “Be in the here and now.”

- IX. What is the Meaning of Life?**
- A. The importance of a connection to some larger context. This can be a deity, a universal or cosmic context, or a social context. The key to finding meaning in our lives is to first identify the larger context in which our small lives make sense, then to understand how we can make our lives meaningful by connecting to that context.**
 - B. We must understand that everything that we think and do, we are playing our part in the whole. Each of our lives has a place in the local and cosmic wholes – family, corporation, nation, universe. Only thinking and acting as parts of those wholes gives our lives more significance than mere distractions in the history of the universe.**
 - C. We must be aware of our temporality, of the impermanence of everything. At each moment of our lives, we need to be aware of our own mortality. If we are, then we can act more meaningfully.**
 - D. We must hold some ideal of human perfection – happiness or flourishing, using reason, fulfilling your role in life, participation in society, acting with compassion, living life as a work of art.**
 - E. Cultivate spontaneity. Actions and values should not be artificial. Return to naturalness and live authentically.**
 - F. Understand the nature of the world and your own nature, and face reality squarely. Be aware of your biologic nature and how you fit in the biosphere.**
 - G. A meaningful life entails freedom. Freedom comes from discipline but also a release from social, religious, economic and political constraints. Even philosophical ideas and intellectual traditions can suppress creativity. Consumerism and the desire to own more things also limits us.**
 - H. Joseph Campbell said, “People say that we’re all seeking meaning in life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive – so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”**
 - I. At the end of our lives, facing death, we should be able to say, that it was better that we here, that we actually made a difference. We made that difference happily, generously, creatively, spontaneously, and compassionately.**