

## Meaning and purpose of life

(For my son, Siddhartha of Tuguegarao)

What is the meaning of “MEANING”? Simply, it means “referring to something important or valuable.” “PURPOSE” means what do we do about this understanding of such a value or this important understanding?

### (1) LIFE IS SUFFERING

All religions agree that our life is imperfect – that we need to better ourselves, or free ourselves from this imperfection. Our imperfection starts with the fact that we are BORN, which is itself a painful experience for both mother and child – we are born in pain.

From the moment we are born, we start growing, that is, we start decaying. This is the rule of CHANGE that underlies everything. Because of change, there is suffering. Because of change and suffering, there is nothing we can hold on to more than just a while, that is, when and how we think about it.

We are born in pain and then we decay – this is not easy. We struggle to live and look for comfort and pleasure for such a life. This is because we lack ease: we are in a state of DIS-EASE. This means that we can, and often do, fall sick. Our body is imperfect with pain and dis-ease; we are often sick with disease. The MIND, too, is often in dis-ease: we are not happy with such a state of affairs. So, we seek comfort and pleasure.

Finally, comes death, which seems to end it all. But we at once fear death because it means loss. Death takes away our parents, relatives, loved ones, friends, those we are familiar with, things we are attached to. Death takes away what is most valuable to us: LIFE itself.

### (2) SUFFERING ARISES FROM CRAVING

Notice how from the moment we are born, we have a body. We begin to be conscious of this body through interacting with our parents and other people. As children, we are given TOYS to help us become more conscious of ourself, others and the world. Our childhood is often colourful; our toys, too, are of bright colours. We also remember and love the smell of our mothers and certain things we like.

When we are born, we are at once given food, such as our mother’s milk. Our food increases in taste and amount as we grow. In fact, often when things touch us, we instinctively put them into our mouth to taste and bite them: we imagine it is food. We touch and grasp things, and sense heat and cold, crying out when they are extreme. We become more conscious of our body. This is the rise of our consciousness.

From the time we are born, we have the natural drive to feed our senses. Our eye looks for pleasurable forms and colours. Our ear seeks pleasant and familiar sounds. Our nose smells what we are used to. Our tongue chooses what to taste and feed into our mouth and body. Our body senses touch and contact, the warmth and safety of our parents and carers. These are our 5 senses. This seeking is called CRAVING because we suffer – we are unhappy, even dis-eased – when we do not get these sense-based wants.

More vital – what gives us life and meaning – is our MIND. Essentially, our mind is the totality of the experiences of our 5 senses. But our mind often works by itself, creating its own sense of things. For example, we dream and imagine: we create a world or virtual reality that differs from our 5 physical senses. Our mind is, in fact, our 6<sup>th</sup> sense: it decides what we should sense or feel (experience), and shapes what we experience.

In fact, we do not really experience the world out there. We project that world from our craving – what we seek the world through our senses – and shape our experiences according to our wants and what we imagine we lack. “Lack” here means we feel something missing that would otherwise bring us comfort and pleasure, or at least remove our dis-ease.

### (3) OUR CRAVING CAN END

As we grow bodily and mature mentally, we are more aware that our CONSCIOUSNESS is sense-based, fed by the senses. We learn to move our mind away from what does not comfort or please us. We direct our mind to what comforts and pleases us.

We feed ourselves with various kinds of FOOD, with which we grow in body and mind. We take solid foods, soft foods and liquids for the body. We feed our body and mind with touch or contact. We learn how to choose what to do or not to do, to think and to feel. We become more conscious of our body, of other people and of the world around us. These are the 4 kinds of food that feed us.

In simple terms, we live on body-food and mind-food. When we learn what food is right and good for us, we become healthier in body. When we understand how we think and feel, we begin to adjust them to cut down and stop dis-ease, and to seek ease and enjoy it. We are happy. We now understand this is our PURPOSE of life: to grow and be happy.

### (4) THE PURPOSE OF LIFE IS TO LEARN

Growth and happiness do not come naturally. We need to learn what is good for our growth, and what kind of growth is good for us. We understand the differences between bodily nature and mental nurture. The body is of the nature to feel pain because it is physical and impermanent. Growth means change; change is the only real event in our lives.

The mind both thinks and feels. The more we understand their nature and differences, the happier we become because we know how to work with them to avoid suffering and build happiness. “Thinking” means our mind processing what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch.

Most importantly, we process what goes on in our mind itself: the works on itself. Our mind itself – as we grow – begins to depend less on the physical senses, and work by itself. It does this in two ways: the mind sees these changing processes that ARE the 5 senses, and it envisions (sees) more than what even all the senses can do for us.

The mind looks for the best way to sense things so that we cut down suffering and cultivate happiness. The mind learns to minimize, even end, what brings us suffering, and to maximize, even keep, what makes us happy. The better we are at learning this mental skill the happier we become. This is our true purpose of life: to AWAKEN from the false virtual world created by our senses and mind so that we enjoy the true reality that our mind reveals to us.

These 4 truths bring out the best in us; hence, they are called the 4 NOBLE truths, the understanding that ennobles us, makes us human so that we are empowered to rise to the divine and beyond, where there is no death; hence, no suffering, because all the fires of suffering – greed, hate and delusion – have been put out. This is where, as it were, we are truly happy forever.

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