

What's the question? That's the answer!¹

Some of us are born religious; some attain religiosity; but most of us have religion thrust upon us. Generally, it can be said that if we tend to be thinkers, we are likely to make a religion of our beliefs or habits, whether it is science or a TV show or a computer game. If we are a feeling person (feelers), we are more likely to let religion, or, more exactly, fear and superstition, have the better of us.

Religion is often said to be a matter of faith, and here lies the rub. **Faith** is often an idea. Our minds conjure up a safe or nice image, and we take it for real. This often seems to help as long as we keep our minds on it and face no serious challenges.

Much of our past, pains and fears lurk unseen in the depths and dark of our minds. Notice how we rarely, if ever, really know why we do not like someone or something. Often we wish we would not feel so negative, and rightly so.

Religion, then, serves as an idea that gives us security when we feel insecure, or hope when everything seems to be against us. So we displace or dilute our fear with hope and prayer. Prayers seem "answered" if we have faith (anything can happen if we have faith in anything!) Those whose prayers are not answered are unlikely to know it or speak about it. The point is that every religion answers prayers, but for each of us, it is must surely be the one we believe in. The point is either we get what we want, or we don't.

Sometimes we are left with nothing but hoping and praying. If we know those who are left with only such options, we should make every effort to help or listen to them. Even if we have no ready solution, just being a wise listener often helps.

The Buddha actually discourages us from relying on prayer. He wisely reminds us that if we wish to be successful, healthy, good-looking, happy, famous or even go to heaven, prayer will never grant them: making the right effort does.

If we wish, say, to be successful, then we must live industrious and moral lives: industry brings success, goodness lets us keep it safe and lasting. If we wish to go to heaven, again hope and prayer do not really work (otherwise, even the evil could get there). We need to be rooted in the good and the wholesome to really live in heaven.

To be "good" here means to respect our body and speech; to be "wholesome" means to make every effort to keep our minds healthy and our hearts charitable. In fact, living in this way, we are already in heaven, right where we are! And if we believe in an afterlife, future happiness awaits us, since we have been habitually moral and good.

A second mistake we often make about religion is that it is a matter of "**personal preference**." For some reason, we simply *like* a religion, way of life or philosophy. Maybe we associate "success" with that religion, or we like the people there. Perhaps, we read more about them than any other religion. Or we only look at what we see as great in it (which is often something we badly want or lack). This is called wish-fulfilling prophecy.

Liking something does not make it right. Sooner or later we will find a teacher, preacher or guru who endorses just the ideas we hold dear. Wish-fulfilling prophecy again! Apparently, we seem to have found *the answer*, but we do not know what the real question is!

What's the question – that's the answer! We have not really asked any proper question. Our life's problems are not so much seeking answers to them, but rather to phrase the

¹ This reflection is based on the 5 bases for opinions given, eg, in **Caṅkī Sutta** M 95/2:164-177 = SD 21.15: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/21.15-Canki-S-m95-piya.pdf>

vital questions about our life. One very unhelpful question, for example, is “Who created the world?” “Who” means it is a “person” or “being”. But *what* really is the world: earth, water, fire, wind, or the four states of matter: The questions should begin here.

This brings us to another way we look at religion: we rely on **reasoning**. Someone then asks, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” The person then thinks: therefore, there must be a creator or God. The creator-God idea is a great idea if only it were not used for blaming others or for crowd control or making some people so violent as to mass murder others, even themselves. Oh yes, what do we mean by “something”?

The point still remains that we need to ask the right questions here. These are the “basic questions” like “What is life?” Then we ask about the meaning and purpose of life. What is the meaning of life? We ourselves give life its meaning. We tend to think in terms of two meanings (often unconsciously), that is, in terms of what we *have* or what we *are*.

Most people are brought up to see meaning in life as having “things”: such as a good partner, a lot of money, a high-status job, knowing the right people, or following a socially-dominant religion. These are *not* really safe bets, because we have externalized our “locus of control”: we are looking for our life’s meaning outside of ourselves. These things are likely to fail us anyway (since we have no real control over outside things).

In a worst case scenario, we might think that destroying life itself is the best way out. So taking “having” as our life’s meaning is not really a wise choice. If we really think deeply, we might realize that what truly matters is what we really *are*. We may *have* money, but we *are* truly happy only if we know how to use wealth wisely.

Of course, we can be truly happy being alone without feeling lonely (this is what meditation is partly about). Yet when we are with others, we also try to make them happy. This is even better: happiness breeds happiness.

OK then, we reply, what is the purpose of life? What do we really see in and around us? What is it all about? Buddhists generally like to answer it this way: everything is a process. As such, nothing is perfect; not yet, anyway.

Then we ask: *How* can we be perfect? *When* are we perfect? *What* is perfection, anyway? We are now asking about life’s purpose. Has life a purpose? Again, the answer depends on who asks. There is the short-term or “instrumental” purpose, for example, a scientist’s purpose might be to prove a certain theory true; an artist might see purpose in finishing his masterpiece, and so on.

My purpose in writing this is to express my happiness so that it helps you to think for yourself. What about the highest purpose of life? It depends on who’s asking (again). But here’s a safe answer: the highest purpose of life is to *grow* or *evolve*. Or, we could say, to *know ourselves, to train ourselves, and to free ourselves from failures and difficulties*. In short, to be happy.

Now we can ask: What does it mean to be happy? It depends on what we are missing. If we were born or raised in poverty, our meaning and purpose of life might be to gain wealth and success. But when we have become rich and famous, we are still never really happy. One reason for this is we do not know when enough is enough. It becomes a game, a race: we keep comparing ourselves with others, and measuring people and happiness. (Everything has a price!?) True happiness can’t be measured: It is a feeling, not a thing.

Often our idea of happiness comes from hearing about it from others. Through **repeated hearing** (from parents, teachers, peers, preachers, the mass media, etc) that

something is true or good, we think it must be so. Or, we could be impressed by someone well-dressed, or high sounding, or holy looking, or good looking. (Question: What really gives us the idea that they are so?)

Religion often uses large impressive buildings, showy kindness and saccharin sweetness, and quick promises of great fellowship and wealth, even of changing the world. (Has religion really changed the world since it all started?) What we see here are statistics and memes.²

Here we need to ask: Is all this *real*? Reality can be virtual (not what it seems to be) or true. Virtual reality is what we want to see and often project them for our own perceived benefits. True reality comes only from a direct experience of life.

“Oh, I’ve lived a full life!” we might proudly claim. But, what is a “full life”? We all have our answers. The point is that we have **convinced ourselves by our own thinking**. This is a very tricky situation: we are trying to use the mind to see the mind: two mirrors facing each other. We might see infinity, and think that it’s really great and that’s all it really is.

Thinking uses words and language, which is not bad in itself, if we know how to think well (like a surgeon using a sharp scalpel). But most of us are not surgeons, not even trained nurses.³ So when we are sick, instead to seeking a good doctor and proper treatment, we listen to friends and quacks; we often end up becoming more sick.

The best way to deal with too much thinking is simply to “stop thinking,” or at least, try to. Just let it be: thinking will take care of itself. In fact, we cannot really stop thinking, but we can put it on a strong leash so that it is tamed and serves us well.⁴

The strategy is to see every moment as a new one or every day as a new day. Every moment, every day, we are a new person. Remember how we respond to someone we like the first time we meet him or her? This is the attentive questioning and curiosity with which we should respond to the moment and the day. This is the beginning of true happiness.⁵

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² See **Memes** = SD 26.3: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/26.3-Memes-piya.pdf>

³ OK, so you’re one: ask yourself why are you reading this, then?

⁴ See **Cha Pāṇā Sutta** (S 35.247) = SD 19.15: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/19.15-Chapana-S-s35.247-piya.pdf>

⁵ On “Prayer without words,” see <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/29-Prayer-without-words-101215.pdf>