

Has life a purpose?

When I was much younger (I'm 76 now), I was sure I knew what my purpose in life was, especially from Philosophy and from Buddhism. The purpose of life is to grow. I've grown all right; I'm getting older. On reaching old age, I realize that such a purpose is neither inspiring nor useful, since growing old needs no purpose; we just grow old, like it or not!

But, of course, there is another kind of growing: the wiser know very well the meaning of this kind of growing. Our real purpose in life then is to grow wiser. To do that we must be willing to learn. But then, even as I write this, am I learning anything? I have so many views, even more views than I ever had before, and I'm convinced that I am more right than ever before. After all, doesn't wisdom grow with age?

Purpose perpetuates population

Now I realize that this is not true either: I have many friends who are older now. I have many old friends who are much older now, but their views have not changed very much. Most of them think just as they did when they were much younger. Many of them still value money and family more than other things in life. Some of them would chatter on about their grandchildren whether you feel like listening or not. What is their purpose in life then? Their purpose in life seems to be that of perpetuating the human species; a noble purpose indeed. After all, if we do not have this purpose, our species would become extinct in a single generation!

But then there are bachelors, spinsters, monks and nuns, or people without children. We can't say that their purpose in life is to perpetuate the species. I know a few monks and nuns who have very noble purposes in life. However, it is difficult to know what they exactly are; we have to ask every one of them what their purpose in life is. However, most of us would think twice about asking such a question since it would sound as if we are being sarcastic that they have none at all!

How being a monastic helps

We simply need to know what the monastic is thinking to know his or her purpose in life. Or better, we can become a monastic ourself. This is best done when we are say 20 years old, but we should resign before we are 40. It is often quipped amongst the Buddhists of Thailand that if a monastic remains in his robes after 40, he will remain so for the rest of his life. Then, we will never dare ask them what their purpose in life is.

Fortunately, I was a Theravāda monk before, and well knew what my purpose in life should be. Buddhism is very clear about our life's purpose. As a monk, I realized my purpose in life while reflecting on the Alagaddûpama Sutta (M 22), especially on the parable of the raft.¹ This parable basically reminds us that we should use Dhamma teachings to better understand ourselves. Then, having understood ourselves, we should not be attached to the Dhamma. After all, who would carry a rickety old raft on his head (or shoulders) or even drag it along, after having crossed the waters of ignorance and suffering?

¹ M 22,13 f/1:134 (SD 3.13).

We are already purposed; no need to have a purpose

To be honest, I have never seen any Buddhist, not to mention the serious practitioners (who speak only with the wise and avoid fools), quixotically carrying any raft with them. Surely, they must have realized their purpose in life. I'm caught in a Catch-22 here: I cannot ask them the question (What's your purpose in life?) out of being polite to them. On the other hand, if they are already awakened or have attained some high status (besides ecclesiastical titles), it is against their monastic rules to speak of how their purpose in life has been realized.

As I've already mentioned, I was a monk before; so I can confide in you (since I am not bound by monastic rules now) that the purpose in life is to awaken. Surely, this is the reason those monastics were silent on their attainments. Except for Zen Buddhists, apparently, who simply love to talk about awakening to show how enlightened they are (putting it beyond words and scripture). "You are already enlightened; you only do not know it!" Does that mean we can say: "You are already full; you don't need to eat!" But then the first is about nirvana; the second is a matter of samsara. Does that matter when samsara and nirvana are the same? Anyway all this seems to say that they don't need any purpose in life.

Who decides our life's purpose?

Surely there is a less polemic and quixotic purpose of life. What about learning; it's close to growing, that is growing in knowledge, even wisdom. Learning means changing our views when we understand a better one, especially in the face of new, better and happier ideas. But do we ever think, much less learn, in this way? We are more likely to change our view because someone (a parent, spouse, friend, pastor, teacher, lecturer, guru or the Internet)—someone or something we trust as being better or more powerful than we are, decides for us what is right or what is wrong.

Or perhaps we are in love, then, our views and opinions have to move in synch with the one we love. It would be lovely to find someone who loves our views more than our looks or pockets. But then our views change (remember?). Does this mean we then must commensurately keep up with the views of our spouse or partner, too? If we are to follow Buddhism strictly, this seems to be so. Can we then ever have views of our own? Or perhaps, we rather reserve truthful answers, and find the words for a pleasing or non-offending answer?

Is there anything of which we can be certain that we do not have to write a reflection as this? I think there is; that's why I am writing this reflection. I can confidently say is that there is the present moment, and therein lies my purpose. What do I do now? That's all I think we can say is our real purpose in life, that is, the truth and reality of the moment.

To breathe and to be

Yet, this here-and-now purpose is more profound than it appears. Right now I must say that my purpose is to breathe, and to breathe well. This is the kind of breath that brings us good physical health as well as a calm and clear mind to live our life fully and discover our true self. That self is neither a thing nor a view; it is this very moment.

It neatly describes the Buddha's purpose, that is, to help us understand why we seek a purpose in life at all.

Let me suggest these 4 guidelines for **the purpose of the moment**:

See evil, the way the Buddha saw Aṅgulimāla (M 86, SD 5.11).
Free good, the way the Buddha freed Vakkali from lust (DhA 25.11 @ Dh 381, SD 8.8).
Love good, the way the Buddha taught Ānanda about spiritual friendship (S 45.2, SD 34.9).
Be good, the way the Buddha reminds us in his “admonition code” (*ovāda, pāṭimokkha*, Dh 183).²

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² *Dīgha, nakha S* (M 74) SD 16.1 (6).