

LEADING A BUDDHIST LIFE

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What is the Purpose of life?

Man is the highest fruit on the tree of evolution. It is for man to realise his position in nature and understand the true meaning of his life.

To know the purpose of life, you will first have to study the subject through your experience and insight. Then, you will discover for yourself the true meaning of life. Guidelines can be given, but you must create the necessary conditions for the arising of realisation yourself.

There are several prerequisites to the discovery of the purpose of life. First, you must understand the nature of man and the nature of life. Next, you keep your mind calm and peaceful through the adoption of a religion. When these conditions are met, the answer you seek will come like the gentle rain from the sky.

Understanding the nature of man

Man may be clever enough to land on the moon and discover wondrous things in the universe, but he has yet to delve into the inner workings of his own mind. He has yet to learn how his mind can be developed to its fullest potential so that its true nature can be realised.

As yet, man is still wrapped in ignorance. He does not know who he really is or what is expected of him. As a result, he misinterprets everything and acts on that misinterpretation. Is it not conceivable that our entire civilisation is built on this misinterpretation? The failure to understand his existence leads him to assume a false identity of a bloated, self-seeking egoist, and to pretend to be what he is not or is unable to be.

Man must make an effort to overcome ignorance to arrive at realisation and Enlightenment. All great men are born as human beings from the womb, but they worked their way up to greatness. Realisation and Enlightenment cannot be poured into the human heart like water into a tank. Even the Buddha had to cultivate his mind to realise the real nature of man.

Man can be enlightened - a Buddha - if he wakes up from the 'dream' that is created by his own ignorant mind, and becomes fully awakened. He must realise that what he is today is the result of an untold number of repetitions in thoughts and actions. He

is not ready-made: he is continually in the process of becoming, always changing. And it is in this characteristic of change that his future lies, because it means that it is possible for him to mould his character and destiny through the choice of his actions, speech and thoughts. Indeed, he becomes the thoughts and actions that he chooses to perform. Man is the highest fruit on the tree of evolution. It is for man to realise his position in nature and to understand the true meaning of his life.

Understanding the nature of life

Most people dislike facing the true facts of life and prefer to lull themselves into a false sense of security by sweet dreaming and imagining. They mistake the shadow for the substance. They fail to realise that life is uncertain, but that death is certain. One way of understanding life is to face and understand death which is nothing more than a temporary end to a temporary existence. But many people do not like even to hear of the word 'death'. They forget that death will come, whether they like it or not.

Recollections on death with the right mental attitude can give a person courage and calmness as well as an insight into the nature of existence.

Besides understanding death, we need a better understanding of our life. We are living a life that does not always proceed as smoothly as we would like it to. Very often, we face problems and difficulties. We should not be afraid of them because the penetration into the very nature of these problems and difficulties can provide us with a deeper insight into life. The worldly happiness in wealth, luxury, respectable positions in life which most people seek is an illusion. The fact that the sale of sleeping pills and tranquillizers, admissions to mental hospitals and suicide rates have increased in relation to modern material progress is enough testimony that we have to go beyond worldly, material pleasure to seek for real happiness.

The need for a religion

To understand the real purpose of life, it is advisable for a person to choose and follow an ethical-moral system that restrains a person from evil deeds, encourages him to do good, and enables him to purify his mind. For simplicity, we shall call this system 'religion'

Religion is the expression of the striving man: it is his greatest power, leading him onwards to self-realisation. It has the power to transform one with negative characteristics into someone with positive qualities. It turns the ignoble, noble; the selfish, unselfish; the proud, humble; the haughty, forbearing; the greedy, benevolent; the cruel, kind; the subjective, objective. Every religion, represents, however imperfectly, a reaching upwards to a higher level of being. From the earliest times, religion has been the source of man's artistic and cultural inspiration. Although many forms of religion had come into being in the course of history, only to pass away and be forgotten, each one in its time had contributed something towards the sum of human progress. Christianity helped to civilise the West, and the weakening of its influence has marked a downward trend of the Occidental spirit. Buddhism, which civilised the greater part of the East long before, is still a vital force, and in this age of scientific knowledge is likely to extend and to strengthen its influence. It does not, at any point, come into conflict with modern knowledge, but embraces and transcends all of it in a way that no other system of thought has ever done before or is ever likely to do. Western man seeks to conquer the universe for material ends. Buddhism and Eastern philosophy strive to attain harmony with nature or spiritual satisfaction.

Religion teaches a person how to calm down the senses and make the heart and mind peaceful. The secret of calming down the senses is to eliminate desire which is the root of our disturbances. It is very important for us to have contentment. The more people crave for their property, the more they have to suffer. Property does not give happiness to man. Most of the rich people in the world today are suffering from numerous physical and mental problems. With all the money they have, they cannot buy a solution to their problems. Yet, the poorest men who have learnt to have contentment may enjoy their lives far more than the richest people do. As one rhyme goes:

"Some have too much and yet do crave I have little and seek no more; They are but poor though much more they have
And I am rich with little store. They poor, I rich: they beg, I give: They lack, I have, they pine, I live."

Searching for a purpose in life

The aim in life varies among individuals. An artist may aim to paint masterpieces that will live long after he is gone. A scientist may want to discover some laws, formulate a new theory, or invent a new machine. A politician may wish to become prime minister or president. A young executive may aim to be a managing director of a multinational company. However, when you ask the artist, scientist, politician and the young executive why they aim such, they will reply that these achievements will give them a purpose in life and make them happy. Everyone aims for happiness in life, yet experience shows time and again that its attainment is so elusive.

Realisation

Once we realise the nature of life (characterised by unsatisfactoriness, change, and egolessness) as well as the nature of man's greed and the means of getting them satisfied, we can then understand the reason why the happiness so desperately sought by many people is so elusive like catching a moonbeam in their hands. They try to gain happiness through accumulation. When they are not successful in accumulating wealth, gaining position, power and honour, and deriving pleasure from sense satisfaction, they pine and suffer, envying others who are successful in doing so. However, even if they are 'successful' in getting these things, they suffer as well because they now fear losing what they have gained, or their desires have now increased

for more wealth, higher position, more power, and greater pleasure. Their desires can never seem to be completely satiated. This is why an understanding of life is important so that we do not waste too much time doing the impossible.

It is here that the adoption of a religion becomes important, since it encourages contentment and urges a person to look beyond the demands of his flesh and ego. In a religion like Buddhism, a person is reminded that he is the heir of his karma and the master of his destiny. In order to gain greater happiness, he must be prepared to forego short-term pleasures. If a person does not believe in life after death, even then it is enough for him to lead a good, noble life on earth, enjoying a life of peace and happiness here and now, as well as performing actions which are for the benefit and happiness of others. Leading such a positive and wholesome life on earth and creating happiness for oneself and others is much better than a selfish life of trying to satisfy one's ego and greed.

If, however, a person believes in life after death, then according to the Law of Karma, rebirth will take place according to the quality of his deeds. A person who has done many good deeds may be born in favorable conditions where he enjoys wealth and success, beauty and strength, good health, and meets good spiritual friends and teachers. Wholesome deeds can also lead to rebirth in the heavens and other sublime states, while unwholesome deeds lead to rebirth in suffering states. When a person understands the Law of Karma, he will then make the effort to refrain from performing bad actions, and to try to cultivate the good. By so acting, he gains benefits not only in this life, but in many other lives to come.

When a person understands the nature of man, then some important realisations arise. He realises that unlike a rock or stone, a human being possesses the innate potential to grow in wisdom, compassion, and awareness and be transformed by this self-development and growth. He also understands that it is not easy to be born as a human being, especially one who has the chance to listen to the Dhamma. In addition, he is fully aware that his life is impermanent, and he should, therefore, strive to practise the Dhamma while he is still in a position to do so. He realises that the practice of Dhamma is a life-long educative process which enables him to release his true potentials trapped within his mind by ignorance and greed.

Based on these realisations and understanding, he will then try to be more aware of what and how he thinks, speaks and acts. He will consider if his thoughts, speech and actions are beneficial, done out of compassion and have good effects for himself as well as others. He will realise the true value of walking the road that leads to complete self transformation, which is known to Buddhists as the Noble Eightfold Path. This Path can help a person to develop his moral strength (sila) through the restraint of negative actions and the cultivation of positive qualities conducive for personal, mental and spiritual growth. In addition, it contains many techniques which a person can apply to purify his thoughts, expand the possibilities of the mind, and bring about a complete change towards a wholesome personality. This practice of mental culture (bhavana) can widen and deepen the mind towards all human experience, as well as the nature and characteristics of phenomena, life and the universe. In short, this leads to the cultivation of wisdom (Panna). As his wisdom grows, so will his love, compassion, kindness, and joy. He will have greater awareness to all forms of life and better understanding of his own thoughts, feelings, and motivations.

In the process of self-transformation, a person will no longer aspire for a divine birth as his ultimate goal in life. He will then set his goal much higher, and model himself after the Buddha who has reached the summit of human perfection and attained the ineffable state we call Enlightenment or Nibbana. It is here that a man develops a deep confidence in the Triple Gem and adopts the Buddha as his spiritual ideal. He will strive to eradicate greed, develop wisdom and compassion, and to be completely liberated from the bounds of Samsara. Buddhism for Man in Society

This religion can be practised either in society or in seclusion.

There are some who believe that Buddhism is so lofty and sublime a system that it cannot be practised by ordinary men and women in the workaday world. These same people think that one has to retire to a monastery or to some quiet place if one desires to be a true Buddhist.

This is a sad misconception that comes from a lack of understanding of the Buddha. Some people jump to such conclusions after casually reading or hearing something about Buddhism. Some people form their impression of Buddhism after reading articles or books that give only a partial or lopsided view of Buddhism. The authors of such articles and books have only a limited understanding of the Buddha's Teaching. His Teaching is not meant only for monks in monasteries. The Teaching is also for ordinary men and women living at home with their families. The Noble Eightfold Path is the Buddhist way of life that is intended for all people. This way of life is offered to all mankind without any distinction.

The vast majority of people in the world cannot become monks or retire into caves or forests. However noble and pure

Buddhism may be, it would be useless to the masses if they could not follow it in their daily life in the modern world. But if you understand the spirit of Buddhism correctly, you can surely follow and practise it while living the life of an ordinary man. There may be some who find it easier and more convenient to accept Buddhism by living in a remote place; in other words, by cutting themselves off from the society of others. Yet, other people may find that this kind of retirement dulls and depresses their whole being both physically and mentally, and that it may therefore not be conducive to the development of their spiritual and intellectual life.

True renunciation does not mean running away physically from the world. Sariputta, the chief disciple of the Buddha, said that one man might live in a forest devoting himself to ascetic practices, might be full of impure thoughts and 'defilements'. Another might live in a village or a town, practising no ascetic discipline, but his mind might be pure, and free from "defilements". 'Of these two' said Sariputta, 'the one who lives a pure life in the village or town is definitely far superior to, and greater than, the one who lives in the forest (Majjhima Nikaya) The common belief that to follow the Buddha's Teaching one has to retire from a normal family life is a misconception. It is really an unconscious defence against practising it. There are numerous references in Buddhist literature to men and women living ordinary, normal family lives who successfully practised what the Buddha taught and realized Nibbana. Vacchagotta the Wanderer, once asked the Buddha straightforwardly whether there were laymen and women leading the family life who followed His Teaching successfully and attained the high spiritual states. The Buddha categorically stated that there were many laymen and women leading the family life who had followed His Teaching successfully and attained the high spiritual states.

It may be agreeable for certain people to live a retired life in a quiet place away from noise and disturbances. But it is certainly more praiseworthy and courageous to practise Buddhism living among fellow beings, helping them and offering service to them. It may perhaps be useful in some cases for a man to live in retirement for a time in order to improve his mind and character, as a preliminary to moral, spiritual and intellectual training, to be strong enough to come out later and help others. But if a man lives all his life in solitude, thinking only of his own happiness and salvation, without caring for his fellowmen, this surely is not in keeping with the Buddha's Teaching which is based on love, compassion and service to others.

One might now ask, 'If a man can follow Buddhism while living the life of an ordinary man, why was the Sangha, the Order of Monks, established by the Buddha? The Order provides opportunity for those who are willing to devote their lives not only to their own spiritual and intellectual development, but also to the service of others. An ordinary layman with a family cannot be expected to devote his whole life to the service of others, whereas a Monk, who has no family responsibilities or any other worldly ties, is in a position to devote his life 'for the good of the many. (Dr. Walpola Rahula)

And what is this 'good' that many can benefit from? The monk cannot give material comfort to a layman, but he can provide spiritual guidance to those who are troubled by worldly, family emotional problems and so on. The monk devotes his life to the pursuit of knowledge of the Dhamma as taught by the Buddha. He explains the Teaching in simplified form to the untutored layman. And if the layman is well educated, he is there to discuss the deeper aspects of the teaching so that both can gain intellectually from the discussion. •

In Buddhist countries, monks are largely responsible for the education of the young. As a result of their contribution, Buddhist countries have populations which are literate and well-versed in spiritual values. Monks also comfort those who are bereaved and emotionally upset by explaining how all mankind is subject to similar disturbances.

In turn, the layman is expected to look after the material well-being of the monk who does not gain income to provide himself with food, shelter, medicine and clothing. In common Buddhist practice, it is considered meritorious for a layman to contribute to the health of a monk because by so doing he makes it possible for the monk to continue to minister to the spiritual needs of the people and for his mental purity.

The Buddhist Way of Life for Householders

The Buddha considered economic welfare as a requisite for human happiness, but moral and spiritual development for a happy, peaceful and content life.

A man named Dighajanu once visited the Buddha and said, "Venerable Sir, we are ordinary layman, leading a family life with wife and children. Would the Blessed One teach us some doctrines which will be conducive to our happiness in this world and hereafter?

The Buddha told him that there are four things which are conducive to a man's happiness in this world. First: he should be skilled, efficient, earnest, and energetic in whatever profession he is engaged, and he should know it well (utthana-sampada); second: he should protect his income, which he has thus earned righteously, with the sweat of his brow (arakkha-sampada); third he should have good friends (kalyana-mitta) who are faithful, learned, virtuous, liberal and intelligent, who will help him along the right path away from evil; fourth: he should spend reasonably, in proportion to his income, neither too much nor too little, i.e., he should not hoard wealth avariciously nor should he be extravagant- in other words he should live within his means (sama-jivikata)

Then the Buddha expounds the four virtues conducive to a layman's happiness hereafter: (1) Saddha: he should have faith and confidence in moral, spiritual and intellectual values; (2) Sila: he should abstain from destroying and harming life, from stealing and cheating, from adultery, from falsehood, and from intoxicating drinks; (3) Caga: he should practise charity, generosity, without attachment and craving for his wealth; (4) Panna: he should develop wisdom which leads to the complete destruction of suffering, to the realisation of Nibbana.

Some times the Buddha even went into details about saving money and spending it, as, for instances, when he told the young man Sigala that he should spend one fourth of his income on his daily expenses, invest half in his business and put aside one fourth for any emergency. Once the Buddha told Anathapindika, the great banker, one of His most devoted lay disciples who found for Him the celebrated Jetavana Monastery at Savatthi, that a layman who leads an ordinary family life has four kinds of happiness. The first happiness is to enjoy economic security or sufficient wealth acquired by just and righteous means (atthi-sukha); the second is spending that wealth liberally on himself, his family, his friends and relatives, and on meritorious deeds (bhoga-sukha); the third to be free from debts (anana-sukha); the fourth happiness is to live a faultless, and a pure life without committing evil in thought, word or deed. (anavajja - sukha)

It must be noted here that first three are economic and material happiness which is 'not worth part' of the spiritual happiness arising out of a faultless and good life.

From the few examples given above, one can see that the Buddha considered economic welfare as a requisite for human happiness, but that he did not recognize progress as real and true if it was only material, devoid of a spiritual and moral foundation. While encouraging material progress, Buddhism always lays great stress on the development of the moral and spiritual character for a happy, peaceful and contented society.

Many people think that to be a good Buddhist one must have absolutely nothing to do with the materialistic life. This is not correct. What the Buddha teaches is that while we can enjoy material comforts without going to extremes, we must also conscientiously develop the spiritual comforts without going to extremes, we must also conscientiously develop the spiritual aspects of our lives. While we can enjoy sensual pleasures as laymen, we should never be unduly attached to them to the extent that they hinder our spiritual progress. Buddhism emphasizes the need for man to follow the Middle Path.