

Meaning in Life



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As this work is not of a scholarly nature, Pali and Sanskrit words have been
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About the Author

Sarvananda (Alastair Jessiman) was born and educated in Glasgow. In 1987, after being ordained as a member of the Western Buddhist Order, he moved to Norwich where, over the last twenty years, he has taught classes in Buddhism and meditation. At present he earns a living by writing and has had six plays and a comedy series, *Boxer and Doberman*, broadcast on BBC Radio. He is also the education officer for the Norwich Buddhist Centre and has a particular interest in meditation.

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Dedication

In writing this book, and considering the theme of meaning in life, I've been made even more aware of how much I owe to my teacher, Sangharakshita. This book is dedicated to him with much gratitude and admiration.

Introduction: Questions! Questions!



More than at any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly. I speak, by the way, not with any sense of futility, but with a panicky conviction of the absolute meaninglessness of existence which could easily be interpreted as pessimism.¹

WOODY ALLEN'S 'MY SPEECH TO THE GRADUATES' was published in a collection of his comic pieces in 1980, about the time I graduated from university. As a philosophy of life it left me pretty unequipped for the rough and tumble in store, but it was a philosophy which had resonated with me, to a great extent, ever since I'd been a child.

'What's the point of cutting the grass anyway?' I asked my heavily perspiring Mummy on one occasion. 'It's only going to grow again.'

My mother laughed but, significantly, failed to answer the question. I tended to ask a lot of questions as a little boy, questions to which my parents very patiently attempted to respond. A lot of the questions concerned death. From the age of five, I was seriously worried about death. I would lie

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in bed listening to my heart beat and ponder the fragility of my life. The anxiety this provoked would make my heart beat faster - and faster - and convince me that I was having a heart attack. Even if my heart didn't stop beating *now*, one day it *would* stop beating and I would be dead, I reflected. What was the point of living if it was all going to end in death?

I remember watching a nature programme with my two cousins (who were twins). They would have been about six at the time. I was a year older. During the programme, the camera settled on the face of a dead deer.

'What's wrong with the deer?' asked Lindsay.

'It's dead,' I said brutally.

'That poor deer,' said Neal.

'We all *die*,' I said, with all the world-weariness of a death-obsessed seven-year-old.

I'll never forget the twins' reaction. They looked at me, and then at one another, and, at exactly the same moment, they burst into tears and were inconsolable for hours.

'Alastair, what did you say to the twins?'

'I didn't say anything! I just said we were going to *die!*'

The twins' grief was deep and terrible, and the incident (which invested me, by the way, with a certain sense of power) became etched on my mind. Upon every life, even upon the life of every child, death casts its inevitable pall.

What's the point of cutting the grass if it's only going to grow again? What's the point of living if we're only going to die? Does life have any meaning? Or can it be simply and concisely summed up in Samuel Beckett's image of a woman giving birth over an open grave?

It was in my student days that such questions began to become really pressing. Impatient for certainties, in the face of these questions, I found the tolerant smile and the gentle

Questions! Questions!

shrug of the agnostic unhelpful and irritating. The writers and artists who excited me at university were those who responded to the Big Questions with confidence, or at least passion.

There was the Victorian poet James Thomson, for example, who in *The City of Dreadful Night* evoked a nightmare vision of a meaningless universe utterly indifferent to human affairs. The city in his poem was a place of alienation and spiritual despair, and I particularly thrilled to the description of the strange figure with 'steadfast and intolerable eyes' who climbed the pulpit and delivered an anti-sermon in a city cathedral. With a kind of unholy joy, this strange minister announced to the congregation, slumped and scattered below, that there was no God. 'No Fiend with names divine/ Made us and tortures us.'²

'There is no God.' It felt very liberating reading these words spoken so starkly, without apology or qualification. Was it true? Thomson's dark and uncompromising vision certainly excited me but the poem was a hymn of despair. To live, not just without God, but without any meaning in life at all, seemed an unbearable prospect.

William Wordsworth offered me a very different kind of conviction regarding the meaning of life. For Wordsworth, meaning was to be found in 'the visionary power of Nature.'³ *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's long poem about his younger self, described the growth of his mind and poetic sensibility, and how his sympathies were enlarged by contact with Nature. The poem's images of the young boy, rowing on a lake or skating or wandering the hills until sunset, somehow seemed to resonate with me, although I was a child of the suburbs. 'In all things,' declared Wordsworth, 'I saw one life, and felt that it was joy.'⁴ It was this possibility of a profound joy that

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excited me so much, this deathless spirit, which Wordsworth perceived within Nature and in which *I* could participate.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was another favourite at university. I particularly loved Macbeth's soliloquy towards the end of the play, delivered immediately after he heard the news of his wife's death, in which he compared life to a lousy actor hamming it up. Life, declared Macbeth:

... is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

*Signifying nothing.*⁵

Here was Macbeth, trapped in an infinite, meaningless sameness, in which time crept with a hellish slowness, in which life seemed like nothing but the posturings of a bad actor. In the privacy of my room, particularly on bad days, I'd read this soliloquy aloud, relishing its utter world-weariness. Why did a declaration of the emptiness of existence offer such comfort?

Literature and drama excited me far more than religion at that time. Macbeth's soliloquy expressed abject despair but at least it was proclaimed in words blazing with poetic fire - which was untrue of the dreary church sermons to which I'd been subjected over the years. By the time I was a student, the religion I'd been brought up with had become redundant in terms of my quest to find true significance in life, and, by a lazy extension, I presumed that the rituals and teachings of all religions were boring and meaningless.

The 9am philosophy lectures weren't providing much of a sense of meaning either. I was too impatient, too immature, (too sleepy), to tease out any significance from those early morning sessions on Plato or John Stuart Mill. The tutorials and lectures seemed to be dealing in dry abstractions. Wasn't there a philosophy of *living*, fresh and life-enhancing, which

Questions! Questions!

I could start implementing on a day-to-day basis? It seemed not. Perhaps the philosopher Thomas Hobbes came closest to the meaning of things when he asserted that life was 'nasty, brutish and short'⁶ and that human beings were motivated purely by self-interest. Perhaps the best one could hope for was to participate in a reliable 'social contract' by which human beings agreed not to devour one another.

Are human beings motivated by self-interest alone? Is there a God? Is there a spirit of love or a power in Nature which we can trust and in which we can participate? Or is all such questioning just the furious, empty babblings of a bad actor? Which of these perspectives is closest to the truth of things? Are any of them close to the truth of things? Can meaning be found which is true for all beings at all times? Or, if there is meaning in life at all, is it the responsibility of every individual to discover that meaning for themselves?

I remember that one evening, after lectures, a drinking friend, losing patience with my line of conversation, wiped the foam from his upper lip and addressed me thus:

'Questions! Questions! There comes a point, Al,' he said, 'when you've got to stop asking questions and start enjoying life. You'll never find an answer ...'

When he was fifty years old, the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy lost his appetite for life. Despite being physically healthy, having a loving family and friends, and being widely praised and respected, Tolstoy's disenchantment with life was total. His existence suddenly seemed utterly meaningless. He felt as if some terrible cosmic joke had been played upon him, and his desire to leave life became as strong as his previous desire to live had been. It was in this state of mind that he was overwhelmed by an urgent questioning, a questioning which would not let him rest for days and nights on end...

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*My question - that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide - was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man from the foolish child to the wisest elder: it was a question without an answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was: 'Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?' It can also be expressed thus: 'Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?'*⁷

For me, as I left university and began to make my way in the world, the questions that were plaguing me became more insistent. In many ways I just wanted to forget about them. I wanted to enjoy my life. But with no answers to these questions, life seemed more and more meaningless.

It was in the midst of this obsessive questioning that I remembered the series of eight lectures which had been given during those early morning philosophy classes at university. The man who'd delivered these talks had only appeared for those eight weeks and he'd seemed quite unlike the rest of our lecturers. He was a lot younger, for one thing. He didn't wear a suit or a tie or a gown, and he didn't carry a briefcase. He breezed in with a rucksack on his back and a pair of mountain boots on his feet. He wore a tatty old tweed jacket. He had long hair which fell down over his shoulders, and very bright eyes which seemed unnaturally large behind a huge pair of spectacles. He brought with him, into the dusty lecture hall, a sense of the outdoors, a whiff of ozone. He had a soft voice but he spoke with a calm assurance. His subject was Buddhism.

This book is concerned with how Buddhism responds to 'the simplest of questions'. Can we discover a meaning to our lives that the prospect of death does not destroy or undo? When in the midst of my own obsessive questioning,

Questions! Questions!

I recalled those eight lectures on Buddhism, I couldn't remember the content of any of them. It was the strange lecturer I remembered. But it was that memory, amongst other things, which inspired me to explore Buddhism. Almost immediately I found that the Buddha's teaching provided answers to some of my questions. It did this by directing me to the very source of those questions, to the basic experience from which they arose... Buddhism begins with the universal experience of suffering, and it's with this theme that we begin our investigation into meaning.