



A place in my room reminds me
of the meaning that I give to my life

Awakening to Sanity (letter 15)

What is the meaning of my life?

Dear friend,

Already the last letters touched on the meaning of life asking ourselves whether it is possible to awaken, and if so, which path we should chose among the many possible ones. Today let us take the question from a different angle: what is the meaning of my life when everything falls apart?

Perhaps I'm going through a heavy crisis in my life: I can't find a job even though I am qualified, I can't feed myself or my loved ones through my own work and I feel completely useless. Since I don't have any money I have to stay at home all the time. I am dissatisfied with myself and quarrel with my partner (if I have any). Most of my time I sit watching TV and surfing on the internet – or I simply lie in bed, because there is no reason to get out anymore. I might even start drinking in order to forget it all; I blame the government, the banks, society, the wealthy, and basically I also blame myself for being so stupid, and finally I blame everyone else who seems to be more clever than me.

What is the meaning of life in such a situation? Let us take the question to its extreme: Imagine that on top of all that you have an accident and become paralyzed. What will stop you from killing yourself? What will give meaning to your life then? Let's reflect on this step by step; I will try to keep the steps small...

Step 1: Coming to a naked assessment.

Yes, there are many causes and conditions responsible for my present situation – this situation is indeed the result of the way our “dog eat dog” society works, it is also the result my own lack of awareness and certain personal shortcomings, it is the result of the self-centred, profit-oriented ‘cleverness’ of business men, bankers and politicians and everyone else including even the clergy and simple people. Yes, all this is true. We see that causes and

conditions are at work – but, does lamentation help? No. A clear, naked assessment of the situation helps. It helps for example to know that Greece was prematurely accepted into the Euro zone by bending the rules and this knowledge should help to avoid similar mistakes in the future. But lamentation does not help.

Step 2: Coming to an acceptance.

As we can see a clear assessment of causes and conditions does not immediately help the present situation, it might give some direction towards our next steps, but first we have to accept what is. We have to accept that the crisis is here, including our unemployment, poverty, accident, loneliness etc. – all of the things that we do not want. Acceptance is the key to change. Those who do not want to accept that things are going bad will remain in denial and blame and basically do not want to start working for a change. Acceptance is necessary in order to leave grudges behind.

Step 3: Seeing that change is possible.

As a next step we have to find out whether change is possible. Here, most people get caught up in reflections on changing society, the economic system, and all the other outer conditions. Reflecting on them often makes us even more depressed or angry because the outer conditions are mostly out of control for the individual – they are the sum total of many factors coming together, an intricate network of causes and conditions to which millions of people are contributing. If we cannot even change our partner or close family, how can we change society? But (!) society does change and so does our family. Everything changes constantly because life is in constant process. The forces in operation in our lives are never static. So – change is not only possible, but it is the very law of life.

Step 4: Realizing the consciousness of individuals to be the place of change.

Now we have to find out how we can influence this ongoing change so that it moves in a good direction. For this a basic reflection is necessary: my personal life experience as well as family life and life in society consist of countless thoughts, words and individuals' actions. These many acts of body, speech and mind shape my life, family and society. So, in order to produce a positive change, I have to work on the individual consciousness – otherwise there will never be meaningful, positive change.

Step 5: Understanding that I have no choice but to start with myself.

Which individual consciousness is most easily accessible to change? My own! I cannot change the mind of others, but I can work on my own mind and then be an example to others and convince them by the work done on myself. Knowing that the countless interdependent causes and conditions that make up our life situation depend on the attitudes, views and corresponding acts of individuals we now focus on helping individual consciousnesses to evolve by starting with our own.

Step 6: Clarifying the direction to take.

Then come the questions of how to work on my mind and which direction to take. What is meaningful and will actually produce the change that I am longing for? Here we need to sit down for a long moment and reflect on the question: Which qualities are most important for me in life? Take a pen and write down which qualities have always inspired you. We are talking about qualities of the heart mind like love, friendship, understanding and so on – perhaps simplicity, perhaps creativity, it is completely up to you to remember your innermost longings and inspirations. Make a long list, as long as you wish, of all the qualities that are worth living for. Then underline those which are most dear to your heart. These qualities have the power to give meaning to your life.

Step 7: Consciously placing these qualities in the centre of your life.

Now that we remember what we are actually inspired by in life we have the possibility to give our life exactly that very direction. It is like working with a compass. Walking through life can be compared to traversing unknown territory. We need a good sense of direction and a finely tuned in compass will also help. We should attune our compass to the qualities of love and understanding etc. and be clear what direction we personally want to take. Now we are actively giving meaning to our life; we are giving it the meaning that is dearest to our heart. It is not a meaning given by someone else; it is what emerges from within our own mind.

Step 8: Remembering to check our compass.

Now, the work that is left to do is to repeatedly remember our inner direction and to give these qualities a chance to flourish in our mind and to inspire every thought, word and act of ours. For this we need to take pauses quite regularly to reflect whether we are still heading in the desired direction – these pauses are moments of contemplation. Make a little place where you live that reminds you of those qualities: a flower, a painting, a candle...

Step 9: Learning how to nourish the qualities until you experience complete freedom.

We will often be quite shocked about the fact how quickly we forget the qualities that we cherish as the meaningful centre of our life. It obviously needs daily practice to actually nourish and liberate those qualities. The whole Buddhist path is about nothing else but this, and I guess this holds true for other spiritual traditions as well.

Step 10: Inspiring others to do the same.

Last but not least we offer whatever benefit we gain from the path of liberation to all those we can think of. In this way meaningful change is stimulated all around us – within the constantly changing context of countless interdependent factors.

With the best wishes for your individual path that helps everyone,

Tilman Lhundrup

(with some help of Andy)