

The Meaning of Life

By Chan Master Sheng Yen

Translation by Hao-De Zou

The Meaning of Life is to Fulfill One's Duties and be Responsible

Many people ask me, "What is the intrinsic quality of life? What is the meaning of life? Where is the value in life? What is the purpose of life?"

The meaning of life is to fulfill one's duties and be responsible. In the journey of life - from birth, to old age, to death - every person plays different roles. For example, children grow up to be parents and students become teachers. You may be a supervisor, an employee as well as a friend. All of these are duties - ethical relationships shared between people.

When duties are not fulfilled, it is said that the roles are "neither fish nor fowl". This is a term used to describe strange phenomena. When looking at ourselves from an ethical perspective, we often discover that we are "neither fish nor fowl".

The Value of Life is to Offer and to Contribute

What is the value of life? Many believe that fame, status, power and wealth make a person highly valuable. However, are any of these real indications of value? Yes and no. The answer depends on how much the person has contributed to society. Where there is no contribution, a person with status, wealth and fame is of limited value.

Offering and contributing also begin by fulfilling one's duties in different roles, taking on responsibility and putting forward contributions.

In this world there are not many people that are directly related to us. If you were to write out the names of all those who have a direct relationship with you from the first moment you can remember, how many would you have? Probably not many. Very few people will be able to write out one thousand names of those who are directly related to them. There are only a handful of friends and relatives that one can think of. When it comes to people who are indirectly related to oneself, then the figure will increase enormously.

When we talk about responsibilities, it is usually about being responsible for certain matters to a small number or specific group of people. Contribution, on the other hand, is completely different. Whether or not an active role is required, whatever the situation, whoever it is, there is always a chance to contribute in relationships both direct and indirect.

For instance, if you are walking on the street and you see a child wanting to cross the road, you are under no obligation to help him cross safely, but this is an opportunity for you to make a contribution. In many cases people will think, "That child will have no problem crossing the road alone. Besides, I'm in a hurry and have no time." But if a car suddenly hit that child, would you not regret it considering that you had the opportunity to save that child's life?

Bearing the Task of Contribution

Thus, contributing is not necessarily restricted to that of our direct relationships, but rather its scope can be large or small; its effects near or far. The scope may be as vast as the entire world extending to all sentient beings. We should shoulder and bear this task of offering and contributing. The meaning of life is to fulfill one's duties and responsibilities, and so long as one completes their own tasks, that is sufficient. But it is more than that: Performing one's basic duties cannot be considered a great contribution.

When I was studying in Japan, my late master, Venerable Master Tung Chu, came upon several Taipei Temples in the midst of disputes over land rights and power. He wrote me a letter saying, "Buddhism is currently in a pitiful state. Nobody is undertaking the task of spreading the Dharma but fighting over the property rights of monasteries." The dispute also involved government claims that since the monasteries were built by the Japanese during their occupation, they were assets of the enemy and should have been returned to the government. Despite this my master encouraged me by saying, "While everyone is fighting over the monasteries, no one is thinking about saving Buddhism by using the Buddha Dharma to save the minds of the people. It is our responsibility to save the future of Buddhism."

The effort made by Buddhist circles to save monasteries was of little value. Rather, the fundamental solution is to nurture professional Dharma teachers who can make more effective contributions to society. Buddhism has made remarkable contributions to contemporary Taiwan and it is the existence of Buddhism itself, not just its monasteries, that is of real value.

Recently, Nung Chan Monastery fell victim to the Typhoon Herbo disaster. The monastery suffered enormous losses over the two days when it was flooded in one meter deep water. Despite this, I said to all the disciples of Dharma Drum Mountain, "Although we are flooded, there is still a need to rally our followers island-wide to respond to the calls for the disaster relief of others." As a result, a fund amounting to three million Taiwanese dollars was collected. This is but one example of how Dharma Drum Mountain may be of positive value to society as a Buddhist organization.

Similarly, over the past few years Dharma Drum Mountain Nung Chan Monastery has facilitated a number of activity camps for students at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Also, we have organized a number of meditation retreats of various levels - such as "Chan Meditation Retreat for Teachers" and "Chan Meditation Retreat for Professionals" - aimed at high school teachers, management personnel of tertiary institutions as well as professionals in industry.

At the "Chan Meditation Retreat for Tertiary Institution Management Personnel", participants included tertiary institution principals, heads of departments and faculties, chancellors and deans. We have never expected anything in return for our contributions. But at the end of an activity a participant asked me, "How do we repay Dharma Drum Mountain?" I replied, "I hope that after this meditation retreat you may go back to your home and school, and share with those who are receptive what you have heard, learned and believe to be useful regarding the concepts and methods of harmonizing the mind and body. By doing so, you are repaying Dharma Drum Mountain."

Among them a puzzled lecturer asked, “If this is the case, won’t Dharma Drum Mountain go broke in the long run? Will Dharma Drum Mountain have finance for construction?”

I said, “The more we are willing to contribute, the more people will come forth and support us.”

I told them, “All of you coming to Dharma Drum Mountain to participate in meditation retreats are like retailers going to the factory warehouse to replenish stock. You become our agents upon returning. All your contributions to society become our contributions too. And you repay Dharma Drum Mountain by representing the value of Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan’s society today.

Accepting Retribution, Fulfilling Wishes and Making Vows

The aim of coming into human existence is to accept retribution, fulfill wishes and make vows. We must accept retribution for what we did in the past, regardless of whether it was from this life, our previous life or the innumerable lives before. We must accept karmic effects when causes and conditions ripen in this life. Wholesome actions bring positive results. Unwholesome actions bring negative results. We must continue to accept karmic results until Buddhahood is attained, whereby aeons of sentient relationships entangled in attachment are transcended.

However, when people experience positive karmic effects they take them for granted. And when they experience negative karmic effects they feel upset. Thinking that they have done nothing wrong in this life, they should not deserve bad karmic effects.

During one of the completion assemblies at the end of the ‘Chan Meditation Retreat for Management Personnel of Tertiary Institutions’, current parliamentarian, Mr Ding Shou Zhong, who initiated the retreats, shared one of his experiences:

“On one occasion my son was playing at a swimming pool. While water was being drained out of the pool, he saw one of his school mates being sucked into one of the pipes and experiencing excruciating pain. He jumped into the water trying to save his friend but ended up with one of his legs being sucked in and sustained a serious injury almost requiring amputation.

“When I heard about the incident, my first thought was, ‘How strange! My entire life has been devoted to social work. I am a kind hearted person. So why has this happened to my son?’ At the time I found this very unfair. But after a while, the feeling of injustice died down and I started thinking, ‘Perhaps this is the law of cause and effect! Maybe I have committed some unwholesome deeds in my previous life and caused my son misfortune.’ And then I immediately thought, ‘Maybe this child was predestined to meet with this accident and to survive this misfortune will mean that good fortune will follow.’ Thinking in this way I no longer feel upset.”

In this frame of mind, Mr Ding Shou Zhong’s emotions were calmed. The concept of ‘accepting retribution’ gave him the strength to face calamity peacefully.

Another purpose of coming into human existence is to fulfill wishes. It is impossible to know how many wishes we have made in the past. You all would have made many wishes when you were

young. When I grow up I will do this. When I graduate I will do that. When I become a mother I must... when I become a teacher I will... We all wish to achieve many things in a lifetime.

When I was young I enjoyed reading, but at the time it was hard to find any books. During that time a fellow army officer said to me, "Mate! Since you like reading books so much, in the future, I will open a bookshop and let you read as much as you want."

"You can't put that many books in a bookshop. There isn't enough space. How about opening a library?" I replied. "Opening a bookshop can make money so that I can make a living. A library would be a liability and of no benefit to me," he said. I had never thought about making money and so I said, "In the future I will open a library."

"Then you go and do that," he said.

After saying so, I really did not know whether there were the causes and conditions to realize it. Thirty or forty years had passed and the opportunity finally arrived. I founded the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies with a library that holds tens of thousands of books. It is anticipated that one day Dharma Drum Mountain's Buddhist Library will have a collection of two hundred thousand books in addition to the Dharma Drum Humanities and Social Science University Library. My wish has gradually come true. Making a wish is a form of motivation. Once you make a wish you need to fulfill it. Fulfilling wishes is one of the aims in life.

When people participate in our Chan meditation retreats I also encourage them to make vows. For example, when they are experiencing excruciating pain in their legs as they meditate, they need to vow, "No matter how painful my legs are, I will not change posture until I hear the sound of the bell". Admittedly, although such vows are often made, most people do eventually change posture for the pain in the legs is just unbearable.

Some people stop wanting to make vows after doing it a few times. They wonder what's the point of making vows if something is not achievable? Nevertheless, I still encourage everyone to keep on repeating vows. As you slowly become more persistent, your vows will gradually be fulfilled. A vow is of little strength if it was made once and not repeated.

When Buddhists perform their daily services in the morning and evening, included is the recitation of 'The Four Great Vows':

I vow to deliver innumerable sentient beings.

I vow to cut off endless vexations.

I vow to master limitless approaches to Dharma.

I vow to attain Supreme Buddhahood.

Many people even just after making such vows will often sulk as before or quarrel with family and friends, only to feel upset and remorseful afterwards. Recalling that a moment ago they just made vows to save innumerable sentient beings and cut off endless vexations, they have instead broken the vows. So I tell them that as long as they continually make vows, the situation will gradually change and the strength of their vows will grow with the passing of each day.

The Different Stages of Generating Vows

Generating vows can also be thought of as directing the mind to the path of cultivation and giving rise to the Bodhi mind. There are five stages, beginning with the ordinary person and ending with the attainment of Buddhahood.

i) The Path of Man

The word 'Path' in the Path of Cultivation is like the journey of life. The experience and direction of life is known as the way of life. Each person living in this world has their own path to tread and this consists of short term, middle term and long term goals within the journey of life. Begin by learning what is close at hand and then try seeing what is far ahead. Much like when embarking on a journey, you must begin with a single step and move forward one steady step at a time.

Thus we know that, on a human level, directing the mind to the path of cultivation begins with fulfilling one's responsibilities to the utmost and equipping ourselves with good character and virtues. When a person does not possess the basic requirements of being a human being, nor behave or think like one, then that person may be criticized as being 'a beast dressed as a man'.

Why is this so? First, they are pitiful in that they do not comprehend what it means to be human. Second, they lack self control, unable to withstand temptations, stimulation and threats from the environment. Thus they lose control over their mind and body.

The mission of Dharma Drum Mountain is: 'Uplifting the character of mankind and building a pure land on Earth'. This means starting from the very basics of being human. Hopefully, everyone will bring out appropriate behaviors in the different roles that relate to their identity. In other words, in order to direct the mind to the path of cultivation towards Buddhahood, one must generate vows to fulfill oneself.

ii) The Path of Devas

Directing the mind to the Path of Man is only fulfilling the obligations and responsibilities of being human. But those who cultivate the Path of Devas commit themselves to serving the whole society through contribution. The scope of care, contribution and service encompasses everyone in the world. Such people as these who have big hearts and who perform innumerable wholesome acts accumulate merits that lead to a heavenly existence.

However, those that cultivate the path of Devas only think about human beings on earth. They have not yet thought of other living beings nor have they thought of those living in other worlds. Also, they are still intent on seeking heavenly comfort.

iii) The Path of Self Liberation

Next is the path of liberation. This refers to detachment from the four elements and five skandhas, so that negative karmic activity will not arise, vexations will not appear and the ocean of birth and death in the three realms of existence is transcended.

iv) The Path of the Bodhisattva

Cultivating the Path of the Bodhisattva combines the merits of the Paths of Man, Devas and Self Liberation. This path seeks more than to establish good karmic relationships in the human world. It entails all sentient beings in the ten directions of the past, present and future, as objects of their service, contribution, concern and care. In addition, the performance of wholesome acts is not for the sake of positive karmic results. Mahayana Buddhism always encourages the cultivation of the Path of the Bodhisattva. The path of the Bodhisattva, however, must begin with making wishes, generating vows and fulfilling them.

v) The Path of the Buddha

Finally, the supreme stage is the Path of the Buddha, which is making vows for what is known in Sanskrit as 'anuttara-samyak-sambodhi', which means 'the ultimate supreme perfect enlightenment'. The Heart Sutra, Diamond Sutra, as well as many other Sutras have always encouraged us to vow to attain 'anuttara-smayak-sambodhi'. This means not merely generating vows to accomplish the Paths of Man and Devas, but also the Path of Self Liberation, and more importantly, to generate the Bodhisattva vow. Supreme Buddhahood is attained upon the perfection of the Bodhisattva vow.

Note:

This article was translated from the transcript of a speech delivered by Venerable Master Sheng Yen on August 13, 1996, at Dharma Drum Mountain's Nung Chan Monastery, during a gathering for teachers who practice meditation. The article originally appeared in A Peaceful World, a book published in 1999.