

A Course on the Meaning of Life

Paul T. P. Wong, Ph.D., C. Psych.

Introduction

What is the most enduring question in philosophy, religion and psychology? It is the question regarding the meaning of life. This existential quest may smack of banality, platitude or psychobabble, but it remains the ultimate core concern which no one can afford to ignore.

At some point in life, whether it is a personal encounter with death, a sudden reversal of fortunes, a tragic event, an impending doom, or a major crossroad, the existential question about life and death can hit us with such force and tenacity that we can no longer ignore it.

Although most of the time, the quest for meaning is triggered by negative experiences and feelings of meaninglessness, it may also be prompted by the need for happiness and fulfillment.

One commercial says: "You only live once, so don't blow it." This tagline begs the question: What are you doing with your life? How should you live?

Since we only go through this life once, we have reasons to make the most of it. The worse fear is not death, but the discovery that we have never really lived when the time comes for us to die. We all have the urge, the desire to live fully, to do something significant, to make a difference, so that we don't have to dread the death-bed realization that we have squandered away our precious life.

Henry David Thoreau once said, "I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life; to put to rest all that was not life. And not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

You don't need to retreat to the woods or the desert, but you do need to start searching for answers to existential questions sooner rather than later. Now is the time – for rebirth and transformation.

This course is designed to facilitate your existential quest. I hope that it will help you discover your true calling, live your life with passion, and fulfill all your potentials.

The five most basic questions

This course explores the five most important and enduring questions about the meaning of human existence:

(1) Who am I? – This is the question about self-identify or the identity of the true self when everything external is stripped away. It is concerned with such issues as:

- What defines me?
- What is the real me?
- What am I made of?
- What kind of person am I?
- What is my basic psychological makeup?
- What are my core beliefs and values?
- What is my worldview of life and God?
- What really matters in life?
- What do I really want?
- Do I matter to anyone?
- What am I good for?
- What are my unique attributes?

- What are my unique gifts and talents?
- Will I be successful?
- Am I still the same person as when I was a child?
- In what ways have I changed fundamentally?

(2) Why am I here? – This the question about the purpose and reason for living. It is often expressed in a variety of ways, such as:

- What am I doing here?
- Am I just a product of evolution?
- Am I just an accident of sexual encounter?
- Did my parents bring me into this world to fulfill their own dreams?
- Am I created by God for a special purpose?
- What is life all about?
- Why should I work so hard to achieve success?
- Is there meaning and purpose to what I do?
- What is my calling?
- What is my mission in life?
- What does God want from me?

(3) Where am I going? -- This is the question about life goals, future direction, and making tough choices.

- Where am I heading?
- Where is my field of dream?
- Where do I want to go?
- How will I get there?
- What do I want to become ten years down the road?
- Whom shall I marry?
- Where shall I settle down?
- Where can I find a place called home?
- How should I live?
- What should I do with my life?
- Where will God send me?

(4) What is the meaning of suffering and death? -- This is the question about the condition of human existence – the inevitability of suffering, sickness, aging and death. It is concerned with finding reasons for living in the midst of pain, affliction, trauma, tragedy, and death.

- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- Where is God? Does he care?
- Why me? Why should this happen to me?
- Why does God allow suffering?
- What will happen to me when I get old and die?
- Is there life after death?
- Is there a spiritual reality?
- How can I face the uncertainty of future without fear?
- Is life worth all the troubles?
- What is the point of living, when the pain is so unbearable?
- Why should I struggle to stay alive when death is just around the corner?
- When death will eventually nullify everything, what is the point of trying to accomplish anything?

(5) How can I find significance and happiness? – This is the most asked question, because most people believe that they have the right to be happy but feel frustrated when they cannot find it.

- How can I find significance in who I am and what I do?
- Why do I feel that life is so boring and empty?

- How can I discover meaning in this chaotic world?
- How can I find true happiness and life satisfaction?
- Is this all there is to life?

- Why do I still feel a void when I've all I ever wanted?

- Why am I still feeling so lonely in spite of all my friends?

- If this is love, why am I still so unhappy?

- How can I find contentment and fulfillment?

The above **big five** will provide a helpful guide to examine our own lives. How we answer these questions will determine, to a large extent, how we live and how we die. Our ability to survive and flourish depends on finding satisfactory answers in our quest for meaning and purpose.

When I first posted these five fundamental questions in the [Positive Living Forum](#), I was amazed by different answers people gave. Obviously, every person has to discover their own answers, but there are roadmaps and signposts available to facilitate the quest for meaning.

I invite you to join us in this important quest. There will be rough patches and challenging obstacles. But the journey will be a rewarding, life changing experience. At the end, you can feel good about yourself, because you have confronted your own destiny, and taken part in the adventure of a lifetime.