

THE PURPOSE OF LIFE

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A journey is truly enjoyable and truly meaningful when the goal of that journey is known. If our neighbor or friend is about to embark on a journey, and we ask him/her where they are going, it would seem odd and rather eccentric to us if the person were to reply that he/she did not know.

The same holds true for the journey of life. If we do not know where we are going, what the purpose is for all of this, then our life would also be odd and futile.

The search for the meaning behind this journey, this seeking out the purpose of life, is the reason why humanity has so many faiths, so many cultures, and so many philosophies.

For those of us who are followers of Vedic culture, we come to understand that the method our forebearers used to find the purpose of life is through the practice of thapas. While our legends and folklore describe thapas as involving sitting in a remote area, withdrawing our senses, and going through great austerity, a more general understanding of the term "thapas" is offered by our acharyas. Thapas really describes a spirit of inquisitiveness, a desire to learn from our Teachers, a contemplation on what we have learned, and the initiative to put it into practical application.

Through thapas our ancient sages documented in the Upanishads, the philosophical portion of the Vedas, the purpose of human life. A quick study of these works reveals to us that the purpose of life is in either moksha or jnana, and often-times in the Upanishads these words are used interchangeably.

Interestingly, despite our talking of them as being the goals, our understanding of these words seem to bring fear rather than resolve to the human spirit. Jnanam or knowledge makes us

fearful because knowing everything about this universe, with all of its mysteries and vagaries is overwhelming and seems to be an impossible endeavour for even the most renounced of individuals. Moksha, liberation, is fearful because it would involve leaving our physical bodies and all that we know and all that we hold near and dear to go elsewhere without return.

If seen from a different perspective, liberation can be seen in a positive light. When a country is freed from tyrannical rulers, or when people are freed from slavery, this liberation is seen as cause for celebration. Perhaps, moksha is a freedom from what ails us, what limits, what tyrannically rules over us, namely our false ego.

Be that as it may, however, the scriptures go into great detail to state that the granter of moksha is God Alone, and He bestows it on souls Out of His Own Desire, Out of His Own Mercy, and only if and when He feels a soul is ready for this Ultimate Gift. So there is really nothing that we can gain by seeking it out as the purpose of life.

The need for a purpose in life is clearly unique to the human condition. Our observations of animals show that they really do not delve into such deep questions. They merely do what they need to do when their instinct tells them to do so and live in harmony with the laws of nature.

Humanity, however, distinguishes itself from the animal by controlling the forces of nature and seeking out things for each person's individual satisfaction.

Four qualities set human beings apart from the animals. Three of these are rather non-complimentary, while the fourth is the secret of our purpose to life if it's set in right direction. These four qualities



are:

1, We do not really know if animals have a language, but we do know that a bird's chirp tells other birds whatever it knows to state. A parrot in a cage merely repeats what its owner tells it. Human beings on the other hand have the capacity to lie.

2. While animals in the wild eat fresh foods that are supposed to eat when they feel hungry, human beings prefer to eat many varieties of foods that are prepared, hidden with the flavours many different spices and cooked such that many of the nutrients are removed. It is interesting that they will eat these foods whether or not they are good for them, and even go to the extent of consuming items that, for all intent and purpose, are spoiled.

3. Human beings are attached to things that not only go against the laws of nature but even which the Ve:das regard as being unclean. We spend hours taking care of our hair, making sure it is combed well and reflects the latest styles. And some of us are concerned about our nails, growing them long, shaping them and painting them because we feel that it makes us attractive.

4. The last quality that sets us apart from the animals, and the one that can lead us to wisdom in terms of finding life's purpose centers on the fact that human beings have control over their mind and intellect, and by directing their thoughts they can shape their actions and take control of their lives. This is perhaps humanity's greatest quality, the one that can lead us to wisdom and liberations.

The ability to have free control over our mind and intellect, and the ability to put our thoughts into practical action is a great gift to humanity, one that sets us apart from all other creatures in this world.

Sadly, the nature of present day life has conditioned human beings to limit our use of this magnificent gift. Our

interests today are mundane and immediate. I have a house with a 2-car garage, but feel that a house with a 4-car garage would be better. So, I strive for that.

The Upanishads, particularly, the Tai:ttiriya Upanishad tells of the great advancements that an individual can make if one conditions his/her mind and thoughts towards great things. This conditioning process involves contemplation on the meaning and power of certain specific mantras.

For example, if a person wants to achieve tremendous power, the Upanishad suggests that one meditate on the word "Brahma." If we wish to achieve invincibility, then we should meditate on "Prathishta:ha." There are many, many other examples. But, each limits us only to that one specific achievement.

But, to know the purpose of life is to achieve everything. For this, there is one simple word that we need, a word that we are all familiar with, "Namaha".

Namaha is used in so many different ways throughout the day. When we greet each other, we Indians traditionally use forms of this word - "Namaste:", "Namask:aram", "Namaska:r." When we go to the temple to perform archana, the priest recites it for us 108 times with each name of the deity that is being worshipped - "Ke:sava:ya Namaha", "Na:rayana:ya Namah," "Ma:dhava:ya Namaha" and so on. Of course, in this day and age, the priest, sensing our need to complete the ritual so that we can go home quickly, and perhaps also out of his own unawareness of the importance of this word, simply recites as fast as he can, generally slurring the words so much that we can hardly recognize what the Upanishads say is the most important.



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