



Buddhism and the Meaning of Life

An exploration of the resonance between
Buddhist perspectives and those of certain other
traditions

Overview of four-week series



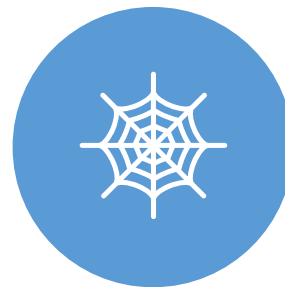
1. Practical Approaches



2. Effective Care



3. "One Bright Pearl"



4. Nothing Left to Lose



Practical Approaches

- The four pillars of meaning
- The core metaphor

Part ONE:

*The Power of
Meaning*

By Emily Esfahani Smith

- Her work is based on published, refereed social **science** research!



Meaning instead of happiness?

- Perhaps: Life has no objective, built-in meaning.
- Human life is diverse, complex and constantly changing.
- It can be seen from many *contradictory* viewpoints.
- Each viewpoint has a specific cultural/political context and . . .
- Each viewpoint relies on a distinct set of unprovable basic assumptions.

No one has a
god's eye view.

None of us have
all the answers.



Four Pillars of meaning

per Emily Esfahani Smith

- There are **four ways** to find (construct) a sense of meaning in one's life.
- (1) Belonging: fulfilling our need for connection
- (2) Purpose: dedicating ourselves to the cause of helping/saving others
- (3) Storytelling: telling *useful stories* drawn from the raw material of uncountable fleeting experiences.
- (4) Transcendence: having an experience where the self threatened by death is seen to be delusory.

(1) Belonging

A sense of belonging--being connected with other humans--is MOST critical to our sense of well-being, happiness, and sense of meaning.

Belonging is strengthened by (A) close relationships in community and (B) high quality interactions.

What these two have in common is focusing on others, opening our hearts to them. Seeing one another in a **human-human way**, not as objects, obstacles or tools.

Conclusion: Belonging is an
indispensable source of meaning

- Meaning is not something we just create within and for ourselves through a solitary quest, philosophical or otherwise.
- **Meaning “largely lies in others;” we create it by reaching out and focusing beyond ourselves.**

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What the Buddha taught

Ānanda: “Venerable sir, this is half of the holy life, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship.”

The Buddha: “Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship.

---Upaḍḍhasutta in the Saṃyutta Nikāya 45.2

When you have a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, you will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path.

(2) Purpose

A stable and far-reaching goal—a goal toward which we are always working. An organizing principle for our lives.

Involves a contribution to the world, making a difference by contributing to something larger than oneself.

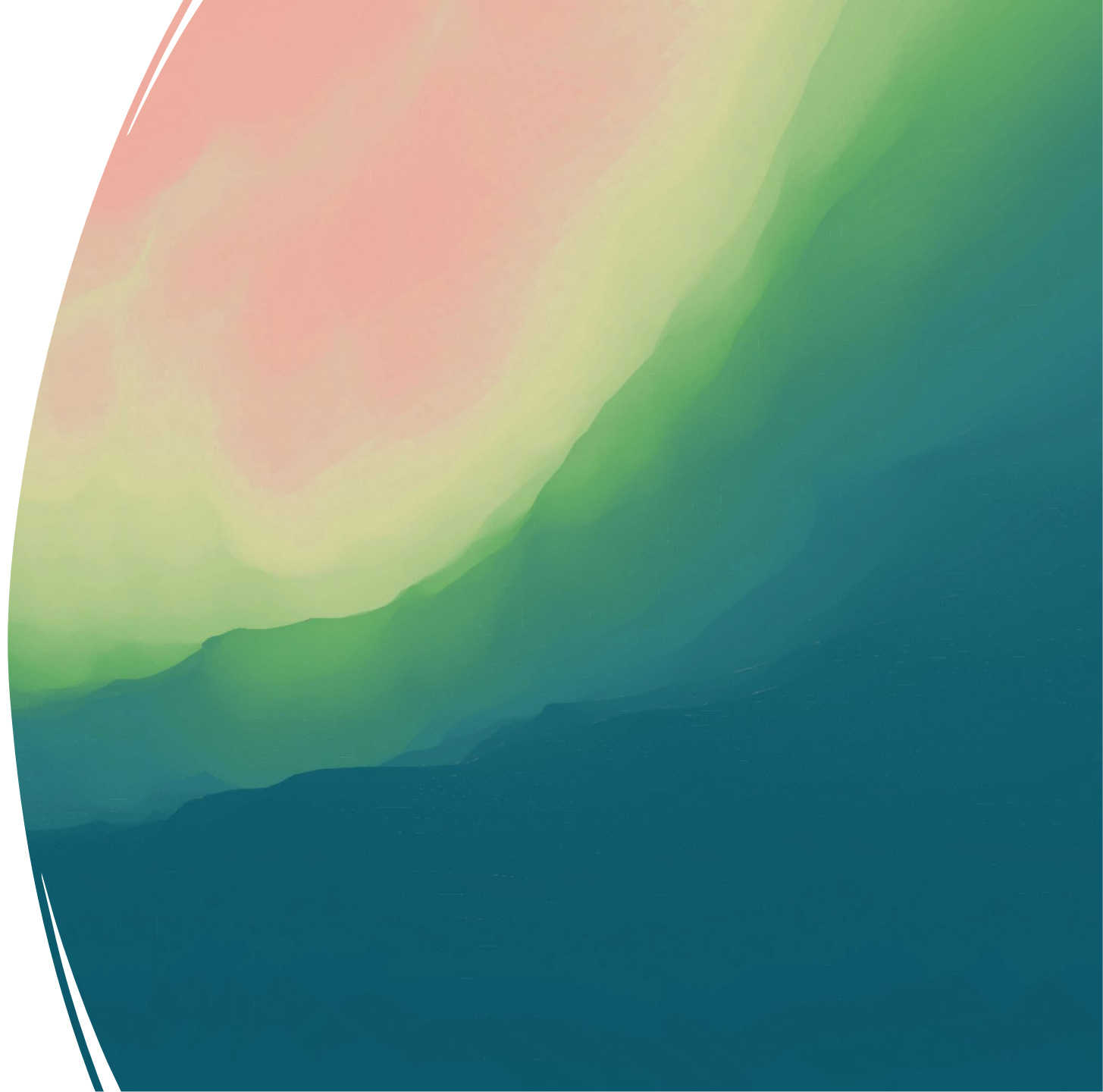
Conclusion on Purpose

- A janitor at NASA told JFK: “I am helping to put a man on the moon.”
- “No matter what occupies our days, when we frame our tasks as opportunities to help others, our lives and our work feel more significant”
- **Everyone one of us has the capacity to help some others in some ways – and thereby find purpose and meaning.”** (Emily Esfahani Smith)

Bodhisattva dedication

- For the benefit of all beings, I will bring for the awakened mind.
- Those with clear minds should lift their hearts with praises such as these:
- “Today my life has given fruit; I have fulfilled my potential in this human birth.”

---- Śāntideva



Four
extensive
vows (East
Asia)

- Sentient beings, limitless in number, I vow to ferry over.
- Passions which are numberless, I vow to extinguish.
- The Dharma-gates without end, I vow to know.
- The supreme Buddha Way, I vow to actualize.

The real meaning of life

- When you practice with a sense of dedication to the well-being of others, then you yourself feel fulfilled. This is the purpose of our life. What is the point of having a luxurious way of life, spending lots of money, while on the same planet others are facing terrible difficulties, even starving?
- Helping others, serving others--this is the real meaning of life. If you believe that God created us as social beings, then there must be some deep meaning in this. As social beings, the very basis of our life is taking care each other, showing concern, helping one another.

--the Dalai Lama

(3) Storytelling

“Life is not what you lived, but rather what you remember and how you remember it so as to tell the story.” ---Gabriel García Márquez

Stories are the way humans create meaning by linking selected memories to create beginnings, middles, and ends.

They help create a stable sense of self and transmit culturally specific values. So they create both identity and meaning.

The story of Siddhartha is the root model

Giving up false refuge

Determination to be free

Middle way

Concentration meditation

Awakening

Skillful means

Relationship of sangha and society

Reliance on the Dharma

(4) Transcendence: Going Beyond the self threatened by Death

- In order to instantly apprehend situations, I had to pass through the fear of death. [My practice was so rigorous] that a voice would whisper warning, “If you go on like this, you might die. You had better stop.” I did feel that if I continued I would die. But it did not turn out that way.
- One night I sat in the middle of the night, a lump of fatigue on a zazen cushion, both body and consciousness in a or haze, and I could not have roused the desire for satori if I had wanted to, when suddenly the fog cleared and a world of lucidity opened itself. Clearly seeing, clearly hearing, yet it was a world in which there was no “me”!

--Soko Morinaga Roshi in *Novice to Master*

Part Two: The core metaphor

- The Awakened one: sleep, dream
- The Path, the fourth noble truth
- The Medical metaphor as core metaphor
 - Taking refuge
 - Four noble truths

Practical healing, not speculation

- It's just as if a man were wounded with an arrow thickly smeared with poison. His friends & companions would provide him with a surgeon, and the man would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble warrior, a brahman, a merchant, or a worker.' . . . until I know whether the bowstring with which I was wounded was fiber, bamboo threads, sinew, hemp, or bark...
- The man would die and those things would still remain unknown to him.

-- *The Shorter Exhortation to Māluṅkya* (MN 63)

Be guided by seeing what works

- The people asked how they could separate true teachings from false teachings.
- The Buddha replied: Do not accept things just because they are being repeated, or come from tradition, scriptures, rumor, guesswork, incorrect reasoning, a bias, clever ways of speaking, or out of mere respect for the teacher or speaker.
- Instead, when you know for yourself that something leads to harm and sorrow and is not welcomed by the wise, then abandon it.

And . . .

- You can see that the presence of greed, hatred or ignorance leads to people taking life, stealing, committing adultery and telling lies, as well as encouraging others to do likewise. All these activities lead to harm and sorrow.
- When freedom from greed, hatred and ignorance is achieved by the presence of love, compassion, joy and equanimity then people do not take life, steal, commit adultery and tell lies, or encourage others to do likewise. You will observe that this will lead to lasting benefit and happiness. Such behavior is praised by the wise.

Only accept what is beneficial

Do not accept any of my words on faith,
Believing them just because I said them.

Be like an analyst buying gold, who cuts, burns,
And critically examines his product for authenticity.

Only accept what passes the test
By proving useful and beneficial in your life.

Buddhaghosa and Śāntideva

- Both give an overlapping array of meditative practices, like medicines, apparently without insisting that all of these be consistent with one another.
- “Here is something that might help, but if it doesn’t work, try this other thing.”
- According to our situation, we need different medicines to loosen our grasping and challenge our delusions.
- There can be many different **right** ways—helpful ways—to analyze things and interpersonal situations. Each, according to circumstance, may aid in untangling the samsaric tangles in which we find ourselves.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism: the View of William James and many others

- **Pragmatism** is a tradition that considers words and thought as tools, instruments, for prediction, problem-solving, and action.
- Our thoughts are not evaluated in terms of how well they represent or mirror reality.
- Instead, we look at ideas or practices in terms of their practical value and successfulness.
- To say that something is true means that it is useful to believe that.

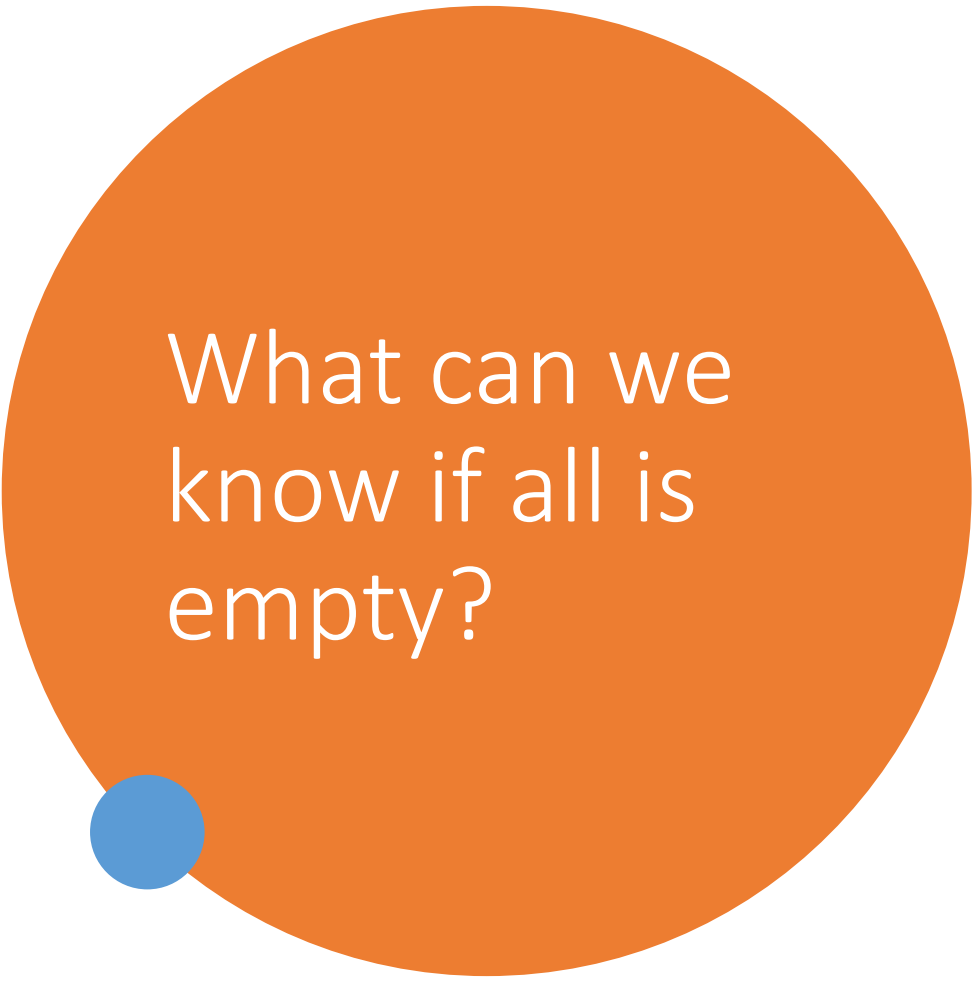
What helps?

- I think of Buddhism as offering one set of ideas that might be helpful. They can equip our minds, particularly our emotions, so that we can maintain peace of mind when we are facing difficulty.
- These ideas can be good for our health, mentally and physically, so even if you have no interest in religion, fine. If you hear something that sounds useful, take it. If you feel that it is nonsense, then just forget it.
- Reality is neither Buddhist nor Christian.


---the Dalai Lama

Scientific method

Based on error
And improvement



What can we know if all is empty?

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- Candrakīrti and Tsongkhapa deny any essential character, any real nature, in the objects we apprehend, so . . . *in what sense can we say that we know them?*
 - What does it mean to say that one person is a reliable source of information and another is not when in fact there is exactly zero independent objective reality against which to judge?

Candrakīrti on conventional minds

- Also, perceivers of falsities are of two types:
Those with clear sensory faculties and those with impaired sensory faculties.
A consciousness with an impaired sensory faculty
Is considered wrong in relation to a consciousness with a good sensory faculty.
- Those objects known by the world
And apprehended with six unimpaired sensory faculties
Are true for the world. The rest
Are posited as unreal for the world.

Tsongkhapa: Conventional existence is a progressive process of elimination

- We hold that something exists conventionally . . .
- (1) if it is known to a conventional consciousness;
- (2) if no *other* conventional reliable cognition [so far] contradicts its being as it is thus known; and
- (3) if reason that accurately analyzes reality—that is, analyzes whether something intrinsically exists—does not contradict it.
- What fails to meet those criteria does not exist.

Karl Popper and the Dalai Lama on Science

- Science is an “*evolutionary process* in which hypotheses or conjectures are imaginatively proposed and tested in order to explain facts or to solve problems.”

—Philosopher of science Karl Popper

- If scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims.

—the Dalai Lama

No absolute foundation → progress, improvement

- What is reasonably taken as knowledge about the cause of disease and the movement of the stars later comes to be understood as fiction.
- This instability—this lack of *final* certainty about what constitutes knowledge—is not a quagmire. ...
- Through a process of impeaching past beliefs and abandoning behaviors associated with such, we can refine ways of living—modes of practice—better suited to our situation, including our bodies, minds and total environments.

Trial and error

- [Apparently] successful interactions with other living beings and the environment lead us to accept as fact the presumptions behind new methods of acting.
- By attentive practice to what works, what helps, we can become gradually more skillful in acting to promote happiness.

The three tenets

of Roshi Bernie Glassman



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- Not-knowing
 - Bearing witness
 - Caring responsiveness



Roshi Joan Halifax uses the 3 tenets in hospice training



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- Not knowing: when we know that we don't know, we open a space for witnessing
- Bearing witness: seeing with fresh eyes, listening with open heart, being fully present
- Caring responsiveness: with consideration, imagination, intuition, intellect, acting out of care as best we are able.