

## Religion Experts Column

*This is my response to this week's question of **Ask The Religion Experts**, a feature in the Sunday **Ottawa Citizen**. Questions are the editor's. All responses are available on the Citizen's online blog for the feature. We invite you to consider this response and share your own. It is our hope this will generate some thoughtful discussion of the real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

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*Sunday, June 5, 2011*

**Q**: Does life have a meaning and if so, what purpose do humans serve?

**A**: Investigating meaning has been the obsession of Western philosophers, linguists, writers and religionists for centuries. It even gave us Monty Python and The Hitchhiker's Guide! It points to other questions, such as: Where do I come from? Why is there suffering? What happens after death? Who/what is God? - the sorts of questions we address here.

For Buddhists, all sorts of answers to these kinds of questions are written in books, sacred and otherwise. Each of these texts, creeds, even the Buddha's teaching itself may be acknowledged as one perspective. As the Buddha himself teaches, he freely offers his understanding of suffering and its relief, the meaning of life. Then, he advises, each of us must confirm whatever meaning we assign to life through our own spiritual insight. With apologies to those looking for a twenty-five words or less answer, Buddhism says the meaning is knowable, and is expressible, however, it remains outside the realm of ordinary language.

As to purpose, humans are not the means or the instruments of some purpose - no more than the sky or the stars or flowing rivers can be said to be there for some purpose. I'll assume we are asking "to what purpose humans ought direct their lives?" The Buddha is quite direct. On his own death bed, he told his followers: "Work out your own liberation with diligence". To this task he offered his Four Noble Truths and Eight Steps to Happiness. Purpose can be fulfilled in many ways, and there are many

teachers and traditions to guide us on this path. However, as the expression goes, "the map is not the territory". Thus, it is not enough to read about meaning, we must turn our lives to living it. Consider a guiding Buddhist verse used in periods of meditation reads: "Let me respectfully remind you: Life and Death are of supreme importance. Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost. Each one of us should strive to awaken (to our True selves). Wake up right now! Take heed, do not squander your life."

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