

"What's the meaning of life?"

In today's world, that question can feel trite. It can feel like something you ponder in your college dorm room before you "grow up" and realize it's not that important.

As a teenager, I used to think about it all the time. Then, as I grew into a stronger atheist (and increasingly nihilistic), I decided that, "obviously" (to me at the time) there *was* no meaning. That there could *be* no meaning. That the universe is just cold physics.

I've come a long way since then, and I now once again see this question as supremely important. Indeed, I believe that each of our individual processes of answering this question for ourselves is itself a core part of the meaning.

So, allow me to adjust the question to make it a little more relevant, interesting, and actionable:

"What purpose do you choose to imbue into your precious limited time alive? What meaning are you able to find in being human—in being a living creature with a consciousness who is born, gets to live for a while, and then will die?"

The next few pages contain my personal answer.

One more thing before we jump in: In this document, I'm going to be using a term I made up: the *"Macro Consciousness."*

Some people might call this "God." But I want to be very clear that *I'm not referring to a human-like entity who takes an active role in our lives.*

I'm pointing to something far more expansive.

Closer to a force of nature, or a complex system, or a combination of scientific laws that are dramatically beyond our current understanding.

The Macro Consciousness is the interconnectedness of all things—the intelligence of the system itself.

It's the precursor materials & forces that fueled the Big Bang (and perhaps many prior Big Bangs).

It's the Hindu idea of an incomprehensibly vast, conscious One entity that split itself into fragments which became the raw material of the universe and ultimately the fabric of the consciousness that lives in each of us.

And if all this sounds too woo-woo for you, no worries (I'd have been in the same boat 5 years ago). Feel free to ignore this part and keep any of the rest that *does* resonate with you.

Even if you completely disregard the whole "Macro Consciousness" thing, everything else in here should be 100% compatible with any brand of spirituality or atheism you subscribe to.

What's the meaning of life?

So many of us today struggle with depression, anxiety, and nihilism. **It can feel like we're filling our days with tasks that need to get done but don't make us happy.**

Like it's always just one thing after another. Like we're treading water. Waiting for something. Sometimes, it can feel like we're wasting our lives.

The purpose I'll be describing over the next few pages is the exact *opposite* of a wasted life. **I'll lay out the three core pursuits for living a life that feels fulfilling—at the deepest, most fundamental level.**

Deeper than the typical life concerns of being more productive, making a bigger impact, building wealth, gaining wisdom, or leaving a legacy.

I'm talking about imagining—philosophically, existentially, spiritually—where meaning is to be found for conscious creatures that are born, get to live some number of years, and then die.

My answer is informed by these relevant influences:

- Having been **raised Catholic** and then **turning strongly atheist** as a teenager;
- **Spending over a decade chasing (and achieving) the traditional markers of success:** receiving a full scholarship to do postgraduate research at the #1 university in Asia, working on some of the top-rated video games of all time, and getting paid a lot of money as a management consultant for famous Fortune 500 companies... **but, after all that, ultimately feeling depressed & empty;**
- Undertaking a very intentional journey to fill the existential hole inside me (e.g., **traveling to 30+ countries**, living in Japan, **carefully & mindfully exploring plant medicine & psychedelics**, attending a wide variety of personal growth workshops/retreats/trainings, etc.);
- **Meditating for 14 years** and **deeply studying Buddhism** and other spiritual systems (in fact, I wrote the first draft of this right after returning from over 120 hours of meditating in complete silence at a 10-day Buddhist *vipassana* retreat);
- Completing rigorous training in multiple life coaching modalities as well as **three years of comprehensive training in Hakomi counseling** (a somatic psychotherapy modality integrating Eastern mindfulness, systems thinking, parts work, and cutting-edge neurobiology).
- **Working with hundreds of clients from around the world**—hearing about how they struggle in life, and seeing what works to help them find more happiness, meaning, and fulfillment.

Finally, I want to be clear: What I'll be describing is the purpose of life that I've come up with *for myself*.

You might very well find that it resonates with you too. That's my hope. But I don't know you, and **the last thing I want to do is imply that I've somehow found the answer that's exactly right for everyone.**

So, I invite you to retain the parts that resonate with you, be curious about the ones you're unsure of, and discard the pieces that don't feel right.

I'll describe three core pursuits of being human.

Pursuit #1: AWARENESS / AWAKENING

Present-moment focus: Paying close attention to what's happening right here, right now. **Improving awareness of your mental, emotional, and body state.**

Noticing when your attention wanders away, and consciously bringing it back to focus on the now. Examining how stories about the present moment are so informed by past experiences, and seeing what's actually here instead.

Seeing past illusion: Working toward increasingly clear and skillful awareness of the **scripts, stories, and conditioning that you unconsciously follow.**

And at a deeper level, **peeling back the layers** of self-deception and culturally-imposed stories and conditioning to see more of the truth of self and reality.*

Holistic health: Caring for your **body & mind** (e.g., nutrition, exercise, sleep, self-care, therapy, etc.) to help you continue that present-moment focus and investigation of self & reality in a clear, easeful way.

Deeply connecting with your whole self— accepting and nurturing all your parts (e.g., not just your analytical mind, but also prioritizing emotional wellbeing, healing from past trauma, and spiritual/existential health).

Appreciation and gratitude: Maintaining gratitude toward yourself, the interconnected “Macro Consciousness” that we're all part of, and the lineage of humans you're descended from.

Regularly cultivating gratitude for the people, privileges, beauty, and opportunities in your daily life. Recognizing how lucky you are to be born as a conscious being at this time in history when we have access to so much knowledge, medicine, safety, creativity, and opportunity.

Seeing how rare life seems to be in this universe. That this Earth might be it. That we might be all we have.

Continually remembering how precious it is that you're going to die someday (maybe tomorrow!) and you get to be alive until then and experience consciousness, curiosity, joy, belonging, pride, play, peace, intimacy, sensuality, inspiration, and so much more.

** I've personally found it supportive to do this work largely within the container of a well-established spiritual system—in my case, Zen Buddhism, which not only has a 2,500-year-old lineage, but it encourages first-hand investigation and experimentation over dogmatic faith. I encourage you to do your own investigations and find the belief system that most resonates with you.*

Pursuit #2: GROWTH / RESILIENCE

Continuous learning and self-

expression: Increasing your accuracy of perception, better understanding how things work, and building self-awareness.

Discovering, following, and expressing your passions, creativity, and various identities.

Reconditioning automatic responses:

At the deepest level, including understanding the fundamental nature of the self and the forces & laws that govern reality (as well as human society and the culture you live in).

Experiencing the deepest truth that all things are impermanent.

Dismantling or reconditioning the automatic, unintentional responses that have been conditioned into you (by your family, culture, marketing, etc.) so that you can see more of the truth of self & reality (looking past limiting

beliefs) and make more conscious choices that are aligned with your values and purpose.

Living intentionally: Instead of following what's been scripted for you by your culture, designing & living your own personal life mission (with your own success metrics).

Maintaining equanimity: Pursuing a sage-like state of groundedness as often as possible by developing resilience and learning how to self-resource & observe challenging feelings without being controlled by them.

Accepting reality as it is without holding too tightly to wanting it to be different.

When agitation does occur, improving your ability to shift states and return as quickly as

possible to equanimity (without simply repressing difficult feelings).

Deep personal growth: Working to heal your trauma, overcome your weaknesses, and make more skillful choices so you can:

- **Maintain the "middle path"** by rejecting (or at least reducing) strong aversion (e.g., hatred, disgust, etc.) & strong craving (e.g., obsession, addiction, etc.);
- **Reach a state of love & compassion for all** (including yourself, and including people you don't like);
- **Act ethically**, and treating others as they'd like to be treated (including animals and nature);
- **Stay committed** to everything else in these three core pursuits.

Pursuit #3: **RELATIONSHIP / SERVICE**

Deepening connection: Prioritizing and delighting in authentic human connection. **Seeing & understanding others as they truly are, and attempting to be seen & understood by them.** This includes those you're judgmental of (e.g., people you believe are unlike you, hard to understand, ignorant, etc.).

(And, here's an optional, more spiritual perspective on this point:

Remembering that we're all fragments of the "Macro Consciousness." We're all made of the same stuff. We're all part of a cosmic-scale consciousness experiencing itself—and indeed that's the whole point of this universe.

This is why liberation for all is just as important as liberation for yourself. When one person suffers, we all suffer. Until all of us are free, none of us can truly be free.

We're all in this together as parts of one giant ecosystem. The dominant culture today encourages us to see ourselves as independent and self-sufficient. But the truth is that we're social animals who are highly reliant on one another.)

Finding & supporting your people:

Building & maintaining a loving & supportive web of community and mutual aid—especially with others who are moving along similar life paths and who share your values & spiritual goals (or who you admire and want to emulate).

Celebrating aliveness together:

Shared community practices and rituals (e.g., song, dance, art, contemplation, storytelling, gatherings to commemorate milestones & accomplishments, grief processing, etc.).

Being of service: Contributing in some way to the collective. **Acting through selfless love &**

compassion to help others along their life paths. Supporting the awakening, growth, and liberation of all beings (again, ideally including people you don't like or agree with). Using your gifts & talents to do the most good possible for all living beings (including animals and nature).

Taking an active role in reducing suffering: Regularly cultivating a state of **profound empathy** so you appreciate just how wrong it is to cause harm to others—and how wrong it is to allow injustice & suffering to happen without trying to prevent it.

Not just passively observing or *feeling bad* that suffering happens, but **putting significant time & effort toward actively stepping up to do something about it** (including taking responsibility and making reparations for past harm you've committed, and taking care of yourself through self-compassion).

The three core pursuits of being human (summarized)

I. Awareness / Awakening

Present-moment focus: Right here, right now. Awareness of mental, emotional, body states. Noticing attention wander away, bringing it back.

Seeing past illusion:

Awareness of stories and unconscious scripts you follow. Peeling back layers of self-deception and cultural conditioning.

Holistic health: Caring for body & mind. Nurturing all your parts (analytical mind, emotional wellbeing, trauma recovery, spiritual/existential health).

Appreciation and gratitude:

For self, lineage, privileges, people, opportunities. Recognizing how lucky you are to be alive and that you might die at any time.

II. Growth / Resilience

Continuous learning and self-expression:

Increasing accuracy of perception, how things work, self-awareness. Discovering, following, and expressing your passions and identities.

Reconditioning automatic responses:

Understanding fundamental nature of self, forces & laws that govern reality (and society/culture), experiencing the deepest truth of impermanence, making more conscious choices.

Living intentionally: Examining your scripting and designing & living your life purpose instead (with your own personal success metrics).

Maintaining equanimity: Pursuing sage-like groundedness through resilience and self-resourcing. When agitation happens, learning to shift states back to equanimity (without repressing feelings).

Deep personal growth: Healing trauma, overcoming weaknesses, and purifying your mind so you can: maintain the “middle path” (avoiding both aversion & craving), feel love & compassion for all (including self), act ethically (treat others as they want to be treated), and stay committed to all of this.

III. Relationship / Service

Deepening connection: Seeing & understanding others as they truly are, and being seen & understood by them (even people you judge negatively). Remembering that we're all made of the same stuff—all fragments of the same Macro Consciousness experiencing itself.

Finding & supporting your people: Building and maintaining a loving & supportive web of community (especially with people who have similar goals or who you want to emulate).

Celebrating aliveness together: Shared community practices and rituals.

Being of service: Contributing to the collective. Acting through selfless love & compassion to help others along their life paths and support their awakening, growth, and liberation. Using your gifts to do the most possible good for all (including animals & nature).

Taking an active role in reducing suffering:

Not just passively observing. Regularly cultivating empathy so you appreciate how wrong it is to cause harm or to allow suffering to happen through your inaction.

Finally, I'll add a fourth bonus pursuit that ties all of those together: ***Creating meaning out of meaninglessness, and luxuriating in play.***

In many ways, reality might be inherently meaningless. Perhaps any “reason for the universe existing” or “meaning of life” we perceive is simply anthropocentrism—the tendency for humans to imagine they’re at the center of everything (i.e., that human concerns, interests, and values are central and significant at the universal scale).

Personally, I think that view is debatable. It could equally be said that the incomprehensibly vast and complex machinery/chemistry of the system of reality could have intent behind it that’s simply far beyond the capability of the human brain to comprehend.

But, since that’s difficult to prove, let’s just imagine for now that there’s no inherent meaning, purpose, or intention built-in...

You could choose to see that as terrifying and depressing, and as a license to do horrible things. Or, as I do, you could see it as wonderful—liberating, and full of possibility.

Indeed, I look at this cosmic meaninglessness from two perspectives:

1. ***Reality is a blank canvas, and you get to paint it with whatever you want.*** You have permission to create your own meaning. To leave your creative mark on the world and exult in self-expression.

It’s a waste of your potential to compare yourself to others, or to feel boxed in by the standards and expectations put on you by society. Instead, you get to live your truth according to your values. You get to create your own purpose.

Indeed, if life is inherently a blank canvas—if it’s not quite so serious as we were led to believe—then it can be incredibly freeing to approach all this through the lens of play.

Childlike wonder. The way that kids can make a game of anything—crafting whole new realities from their imaginations and turning everyday objects into talismans.

The universe might just be cold physics, but we conscious beings bring a sparkling light to it. In

how we choose to frame each day for ourselves (either as banal or wondrous), we have the power of creation and transfiguration at our disposal—even as adults.

To paraphrase the philosopher Alan Watts: There is no destination to reach in life. Living is less like doing work and more like creating art. You don’t work the piano. You *play* the piano.

If you’re traveling to a specific destination, the point of the travel is to get to that place.

But in music, the point of the song is not to get to the end of it (then the best pieces of music would be the shortest ones!). When you dance, the goal is not to move to a certain spot in the room, but simply to dance. The point of the dancing is the dance.

It can be easy to hear words like “play” or “painting a blank canvas” and frame them as frivolous pursuits. But, to me, they are utterly, *achingly* important.

Because what could be more valuable and sacred than ***peering into the void and weaving emptiness into something beautiful, meaningful, and worth experiencing?***

2. *You can also play your part in making reality just a little bit better for everyone involved.*

We're lucky enough to be here on this precious ball of gas and dust that formed into a planet and eventually developed the ingredients for humans to appear. I believe that gives us some responsibility.

We're all in this together. If we each do our small part to make this world better for all of us, we collectively imbue meaning into an existence that might have *begun* as meaningless but need not remain that way.

So: awareness, growth, relationship, and creating meaning out of meaninglessness (through creativity and play).

Those are my purposes for living. This core is the basis for all my work in the world.

Thanks for reading. Now, where can you go from here?

Try these:

- **You only have a limited time to be alive. What should you do about that? I've helped many clients navigate this. Here are my top tips in 3 big areas.**
- **My 7-day guided meditation series—for complete beginners (and intermediates too)**
- **(video) Why Zen Buddhist meditation (and retreat) is profoundly valuable for answering life's big questions**
- **5 years ago, I was waiting for my "real" life to start. Here's the lesson that changed my life (& helped me realize why I'd been so depressed)**

Awareness / Awakening

- Present-moment focus
- Seeing past illusion
- Holistic health
- Appreciation and gratitude

Meaning / Play

- Painting the blank canvas of reality
- Making reality better for all
- Imbuing meaning through play
- Dancing simply for the dance itself

Growth / Resilience

- Continuous learning and self-expression
- Reconditioning automatic responses
- Living intentionally
- Maintaining equanimity
- Deep personal growth

Relationship / Service

- Deepening connection
- Finding & supporting your people
- Celebrating aliveness together
- Being of service
- Taking an active role in reducing suffering