

The Source of Life is Calling

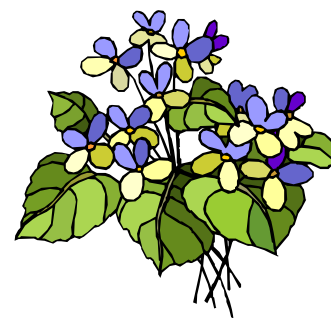
『生命故鄉的呼喚』

Follow your Heart to where your Home is

Let Your Heart Be *Alive*

The Profound Beauty in the Garden of Life

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Chapter Seven

The Quadrants of life

The intriguing part of spiritual practice is to reach for perfection while living. Through spiritual practice, Buddhist practitioners will gain insight into the phenomenon of “illusive survival” and become cognizant of “true existence”. Unfortunately, something is lost in translation when this is communicated verbally or in writing.

I hope the analogy below will help you understand this better.

In the 60's and 70's, university education was beyond the reach of most people. To many parents and students, a university degree was equated with success in life, the ticket to wealth, a good marriage and happiness. Therefore, parents worked really hard in order to support their children's education financially. The students in turn, worked towards achieving the expectations set by their parents and teachers - owning a house, a car, making lots of money, marrying and having their own children. The cycle continues, as they set the same expectations for their children. (Many people nowadays still think the same way!) Will this kind of living bring lasting satisfaction? Apparently not!

Living according to a fixed program would be like living like a robot. However, life is full of

uncertainty! That is why people who are inflexible in adapting to unexpected events will experience much misery and agony in their lives.

In general, there are **three levels of perception of life (three levels of living)**:

1. Survival of the family.

This is the stage when a family puts down roots to get established. Nowadays, in developed society, most of us have planted our roots and have secured the basic necessities of living. We are no longer concerned about survival, so we focus our attention on improving our current living conditions. We want to nurture our children so that they will be become better and stronger than us. We want to keep ahead of the Joneses.

2. Pursuit of professional and higher aspirations

With our support, most children in this day and age do not have to worry about their day-to-day existence. Therefore they can aim for higher aspirations such as: art, painting, music, sculpting and the like. These pursuits are not vital for survival, but they can expand our understanding of what it means to be human and they help us to explore the meaning of life.

Why do we spend so much time and money on our children's extracurricular lessons in music, arts, sports or other hobbies? Are we merely trying to “keep up with the Joneses”? Are we pretending that we are artistic and cultured? Do we hope that these activities will steer our children away from bad influences? The motivation that inspires our course of action is very important.

Have we thought about enrolling them in all kinds of learning so they can develop their attitude towards servicing others and helping to build a better society? A stable environment provides us with the luxury to serve society by helping those who are less fortunate. Many people may have chosen their professions to become lawyers, doctors or engineers, based on the financial reward; let's not undermine the social and spiritual returns. There are many other kinds of professionals who dedicate themselves towards building a better society. And if we all try our best at what we excel, society as a whole will be enhanced.

3. Being a philosopher or practitioner.

The third level of perception is the higher calling that will lead to ultimate perfection.

It is difficult to raise a child to become a businessman or a politician. It is even more difficult to raise a child to become a philosopher because abstract thinking is an innate ability: one is either born with it or not. But it is most difficult to raise a child to become a spiritual practitioner, as he/she has to possess superior character, dedication and an adventurous spirit in order to take up the challenge of the "unknown path" until he or she reaches enlightenment.

How can we, as parents, ensure that our children will have a better quality of life than we did?

When parents are struggling for their own survival, it is completely understandable that they would want to direct their children into careers that have the highest incomes. However, is it wise to choose one's children's course of study based on today's highest pay or market needs? Who can predict what the job market will be like when they graduate?

If the parents have achieved stability, the children should have the opportunity to focus on achieving their own aspirations in life. This striving towards an improved quality of life will help subsequent generations to become stronger and to define life with more meaning and purpose.

Without such aspirations, generation after generation will still be trapped within the cycle driven by the struggles for fame, power and lust. Consequently, they will continue to be tormented by greed, desire and ignorance.

True existence is much more desirable and glorious than one can imagine. Open your heart; do not be confined by narrow-minded, conventional thinking. Live life to its fullest.

This forms the basis for further discussion.

Just as in the science of economics, there are **four phases in the journey of life**: namely, "Recovery", "Expansion", "Contraction" and "Recession".

Recovery: when someone who has gone through an extremely difficult time and is recovering or coming back. For example someone who has been through a nasty divorce is now trying to regroup and move on with life.

Expansion: when one excels and experiences success. These are the glory days! For example, a student excels in academics and is well liked by his peers.

Contraction: when one's life is turning a corner, and yesterday's success looks like it might lead to tomorrow's downfall. For example, a student who had good grades before his parents decided to divorce now sees his grades slipping.

Recession: when one's success is but a memory and one is now living in the gloom of failure. For example, the student who excelled in school finds that his "success at school" doesn't always translate into "success at work." His confidence is diminished as a result of his repeated failures at work and his friends have left him not wanting to be associated with a loser.

Everyone goes through these phases at different times and in different aspects of their lives. For some, their expansion phase may be while they were children living with their parents, while others may have their glory days reaching the pinnacle in their careers.

Losing a job may result in "recession" for some, but "recovery" for others. If the person lost a job, it can mean a loss of income to support their family, and therefore they need to be more careful with their spending. Or, if they already have another job lined up, the severance pay will become like a bonus and the new job may pay even better.

Having children may be a “contraction” for fathers because it will mean that they have to work harder to support the child and they have lost the income normally generated by the wife. But this could be an “expansion” for mothers because they can devote more love and attention to their baby, fulfill their mothering instinct, and finally have more time to focus their energies in nurturing a loving family. Each of us experiences and reacts to life’s events differently.

One can also experience many of the phases at the same time. For example, one might be at the expansion phase of one’s career (getting a promotion), at the contraction phase in one’s marriage (getting a divorce) and at the recession phase with one’s health (just diagnosed with pneumonia).

Our attitudes and behaviors are often affected by how others react towards us. Different people react differently in accordance with their unique perception, social background and mentality. These reactions may not be good nor evil, just different. When we can understand how these four phases operate in our lives, we will be able to better apprehend our own position and others’ position in life.

Let’s look at the lessons we can learn!

Look at Donald Trump. Some would say that he excels at what he does: making deals and making money. He made his millions in real estate, but failed poorly when he ventured into the gambling industry. He experienced “expansion” in his real estate dealings and “recession” in the gambling business. A person who is smart and successful in one area can be a failure in another area. But, why don’t successful people stick to their own area of expertise?

When people have money and power, they can believe they are invincible. But, in reality, one is not totally responsible for one’s success. It is a combination of one’s skills, the social circumstances at the time and good fortune. When any of these are unfavorable, success will be illusive regardless of how skillful one is. Therefore, we must be able to see through these illusions before we can learn to break through to reach the state of true existence.

Now we will talk about “**the quadrants of life**” based on the three levels of perception and the four phases in the journey of life mentioned earlier.

Our physical body constitutes the “first quadrant of life”. According to Buddhists, the “body” is composed of Four Elements -“earth, water, fire and air”. These Four Elements are also known as “physical phenomenon”.

Man has spent thousands of years researching the physical body. In spite of all the advances in medicine and related sciences, there is much beyond man’s control. Comparatively, man’s attempts to understand our spiritual being have only just started; therefore, knowledge about how it works is practically nonexistent.

Besides the physical *form* of the body, there are other components of life: they are the mental constituents of “*feeling, cognition (perception), motivation (mental formation) and consciousness.*” Together, they constitute the five *aggregates* (Skandhas) attached to mortality. Just as the body affects our physiological functioning, the aggregates of “feelings, cognition, motivation and consciousness” affect our psyche. But people still know very little how these four mental aggregates work.

The lack of understanding about the physical phenomenon in the first quadrant of our lives makes it rather impossible for us to manage the other manifestations of illusions within our lifetimes. Many people are stunned by their failures because they do not know how to get past these illusions and end up being trapped within them. How pitiable that is! Therefore, if you know someone trapped in this situation, please encourage them to accept the guidance and direction provided by any well-established and recognized religion, so that they can circumvent the obstacles or miseries in life.

Our intrinsic nature is always calling upon us, helping us to recognize the need to find our true self, to reveal the ultimate truth. We cannot experience authentic existence through the working of brain function alone. There are many facets of life that are beyond the reach of our brain functions. The brain cannot even differentiate, let alone control, the illusions in our lives, how then can it experience true existence?

According to Buddhism, we have lived many cycles of birth and death, being reincarnated over and over, without even knowing who “me” is, or where “home” is. How can we penetrate the layers of stubbornness and ignorance fabricated by our brain for innumerable lives, while these cumulative layers prevent us from reaching the true nature of all things? Other than enlightened Buddhist practitioners, it will be difficult to find others who can see the “TRUE SELF” or the “Tathagata”.

We must first be able to recognize the illusions within our own lives, in order to transcend and enter into true existence. I call this transformation from the illusive first quadrant of life to the true existence of the second quadrant of life as the “**Shifting of Quadrants**”. This shifting takes place within this mundane world; it is not just a transformation of the mind but also the revolution of our complete life’s experience.

Be absolutely clear that this shifting is not a physical shift from one dimension to another. Whether you call the ideal state or true existence heaven, the lord’s kingdom or pure land--these places are not “out there”. They exist in the present and within you. The shifting or transformation commences when your mind can recognize the illusions in life and be able to transcend from physiological to psychological phenomena. Furthermore, through the psychological phenomenon and cultivated activities, your mind will advance into the spiritual realm, into the inexhaustible quadrants. I use the term “spiritual realms” instead of “spiritual phenomena” because once you are in those realms, the transformation is total.

Let’s look at an example using my slim physique. One person may wonder why I am so thin (Do I have stomach problems?). Another person may comment on my great achievement as a Chan master (most Chan masters are thin). And yet, they are both referring to the same me! They have two totally different perceptions because of two different states of mind. The one who thought I have stomach problems refers to a biological world while the other does not.

We have all encountered situations where the same object can create two varied opinions. Yet they are only partial reflections of the same object. Similarly, the perception of psychological transformation can

be restricted to partial changes from one illusive perception to another, whereas the transference into the spiritual realm is absolute and total. Once we enter the spiritual realm, the perception on life is totally elevated, we will be able to comprehend phenomenon “AS IS”, no more and no less -- without illusion. All will become clear.

When we are able to enter into the spiritual realm and experience a total transformation in all aspects of our life, we call it “cultivated practice” or “the shifting of quadrants”.

Many people in Taiwan have liver diseases, such as liver cancer or hepatitis. Many people are afraid to talk about it, because doing so may result in their succumbing to the disease, and to death. Many have lost interest in living once they are diagnosed. Some of them are our friends and relatives.

I have liver cancer. Fifteen years ago, my doctor gave me a prognosis of three weeks to live and told me to get my affairs in order. Two months later, my doctor was surprised when I returned for my follow-up appointment; I was still living! Then he was stunned when I showed up six months later. Many years have passed and the doctor still cannot explain why I am still around.

From a doctor’s perspective, a man with terminal liver cancer should die soon. So, everyone should suffer like the others who have this illness. You might, but you absolutely do not have to!

We must make our own destiny! As I have said before, a doctor can only manipulate a small portion of our physiology, and significantly less of our psyche. How can we be freed from the restrictions imposed by our physiological or psychological aspects of living? From a spiritual perspective, the key is to work on the “shifting of the quadrants” into the spiritual realm, and then the physical and psychological attributes can no longer manipulate you. This is what “out of the three realms of existence” means in Buddhism.

... to be continued in next issue

