



Svaroopā® Vidya Ashram

October 2021 Teachings Article:

Big Questions #10

What is Life?

By Gurudevi Nirmalananda

After contemplating death, the next big question is about life. You are alive. It is self-evident. What is this thing that we call “life”?

There is an energy of aliveness that makes your body be a living body rather than the corpse it will become one day. Yoga calls this energy, “prana.” It is easy to see in a vase of fresh-cut flowers. As they lose prana, they wilt and die. When they’re full of prana, they’re fragrant and vibrantly alive. You are supposed to be, too.

When you are low on prana, you’re wilting. You feel threatened by everything. The good news is that most anxieties are cured by increasing your prana, through the slow-breathing practice called Ujjayi Pranayama.¹ The word prana is imbedded in the name pranayama, meaning the practice is about your aliveness, not about your breath. It is a way to use your breath to access your prana directly, freeing it up and making you more alive. It also improves your immune system, as well as helping with the healing of any and all conditions, thus improving the quality of your life.

Quality of life is important, we all agree. But what is life? We’ve bumped into another meaning of the word: your lifespan and what you do with it. These are big questions indeed!

Some people think that life is about entertainment, to indulge in as many sense pleasures as possible, along with acquiring wealth, fame and power. Ancient India had a similar school of hedonism called Charvaka. It was an atheistic philosophy that rejected reincarnation and preached, “Party hearty! You only get one time around, so make the most of it.” Similarly, ancient Greeks worshipped Dionysus while Romans had Bacchus, who was worshipped in bacchanalias. They revered insanity and spirit-possession, prioritizing intoxication and sexuality as the most important experiences in life.

These perspectives still echo through Western culture, displayed and even promoted by many of the rich and famous. In India 3,000 years ago, both Hinduism and Buddhism worked hard to eradicate the Charvaka philosophy and inspire people to a more uplifting lifestyle.

It’s easy to see that most hedonistic behaviors are self-harming. As a young adult, I quickly realized that the hangover lasted longer than the party. Worse, I could see the detrimental effects on my body, life and relationships. However I couldn’t figure out what else to do because that was the only lifestyle being modeled for me.

I began to ponder: what is life and what is its purpose? I searched for answers in education, in religion, in nature, in solitude and in service to others, but I came up empty. In the night I sometimes cried out, “What is life?” My question was full of angst and anger.

Then I found yoga. More than merely poses, I found the wisdom of the sages, which moved me deeply. Their teachings awakened an inner knowing I hadn’t previously been able to access. I felt nourished from the inside. Yoga’s physical practices and meditations also enlivened me, giving me a new lease on life.

I became more alive, healthier, happier and was living with a deep sense of purpose. I’ve never lost it. My experience has continued to deepen and expand inward for decades. The words are the same, “What is life?” But the feeling is different. I live in a profound sense of awe at the majesty of life in all its forms.

Yoga says that this entire universe is created out of Shiva’s bliss. Experiencing the ecstasy of Self-Knowingness, Shiva expresses it in a cosmic dance, swirling his own beingness within his own being. His cosmic dance is the energy that builds and intensifies, exploding as the Big Bang, thus being the energy that coalesces into matter.

¹ Pronounced “ood-jaw-ye praw-naw-yaw-maw,” instructions are included in Swami Nirmalananda’s CD [Experience Shavasana](#).

Life itself is made of Divine bliss. Prana is Shiva's pulsation, like the heartthrob of a drum that drives the cosmic dance. It is expressed in all living forms. Your own heart beats because of prana. Your breath moves. Your eyes and ears perceive the world. Prana makes your brain function in its amazing and intricate ways.

Universal prana keeps the universe alive. Individual prana keeps your body alive. Prana is the aliveness itself. Your own prana is both Divine and individual at the same time. But you lose track of the Divine dimension and get lost in your personal reactions, needs and fears.

My Guru explained that your feelings and thoughts are important in worldly matters, but for spiritual development, you must transcend them. It's like ripples on the surface of a lake. The ripples of your personal emotions and reactions make it impossible for you to see into the deeper waters. When you base yourself in your own Self, you experience Divine emotions. Your thoughts are inspired and inspiring. You live a Divine life. You fulfill the purpose for which you were born.

The sutras explain that your life is not limited to a single purpose. You were born for a two-fold purpose: to experience and to express. Your own life is your personal version of Shiva's cosmic dance. As an individualized form of Shiva, you are here to experience life and to express yourself through it. You choose where it all happens. Your choice is called free will, one of the Divine qualities that is intact within the human being. You can pour your life into anything you choose.

Nartaka atma. — Sivasutra 3.9

Your own Self is the actor.

When you become enlightened, you will still live in this world. You will eat, walk, talk and do things. In the bliss of your Self-Knowingness, you can take on any role, like a professional actor does. You can sing any song, like a professional singer does. But you don't become the role. You don't become the song.

The point is that, while you do what you do, you know who you are. You are Shiva. You are your own Self. You can choose to live anywhere, to do anything, with whomever you select. It could even be where you live now, doing what you already do with those you already know.

But if you're looking for those outer things to fill you up or make you happy, you're looking in the wrong place. Nothing finite can fill the inner infinity. You must find your own Self, so you can bring your Self with you everywhere you go. You must know your own deeper essence in order to make it through, not merely to survive, but to thrive.

In early 2020, after one month of the USA pandemic lockdown, a journalist bemoaned the loss of her evenings in her neighborhood bar. She went on to describe that it turned out to be very beneficial. Newly sober, she was enjoying a surprising new level of health, vitality and mental clarity.

Yoga, of course, expands upon that. The effects of the poses and meditative practices not only improve your health, mind and life, but open up a new dimensionality for you to explore within. Here you find the source of happiness, creativity, love, compassion, generosity, intelligence — even the source of your own aliveness.

This inner source is your own Self, the One Reality that is in all, being all, pervading all, yet beyond all. The multiplicity of this universe is the many forms of the One. Yet the One can be found only by looking inward, where you will find that your own Self is the Self of all.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES, "BIG QUESTIONS"

To reach our teachers or to learn more about *Svaroopā*® Yoga & Meditation, contact
Svaroopā® Vidya Ashram ♦ www.svaroopā.org ♦ info@svaroopayoga.org ♦ 610.644.7555