

**What is the Meaning of Life? How to Discover Meaning According to Viktor Frankl  
(Meetup Lesson 4 Outline)  
© Paul T. P. Wong**

**Objectives of this lesson:** to clarify the concept of meaning of life as the foundation for survival and flourishing.

**Introduction**

“What is the meaning of life?” This is probably the most persistent and important question ever asked. The human propensity for grappling with existential questions has long been evident in the chronicles of philosophy, religion, and literature. The broad appeal of trade publications like Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning* and Rick Warren’s *Purpose Driven Life* also attests to the widespread public interest in meaning and purpose.

Inquiry into the meaning of life goes back to antiquity from Lao Tzu (1913) to King Solomon (Ecclesiastes, New International Version). There is also a long and venerable tradition in psychology on exploring the meaning of human existence (Adler, 1931/1958; James, 1902; Jung, 1933; Frankl, 1985; May, 1958) and self-actualization (Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1980). However, empirical studies of meaning have been very recent (Wong & Fry, 1998).

More than any other therapy, Viktor Frankl’s logotherapy (1985, 1986) capitalizes on the unique attributes of human beings as meaning-seeking and meaning-making creatures. The experience of awakening to the power of meaning and self-transcendence is the key to human flourishing. Frankl grew up and lived through two World Wars and the Great Depression. In the midst of suffering, he discovered that the only way to survive and live on a higher spiritual level in trying circumstances was through meaning.

Viktor Frankl died in 1997, but his enduring influence has continued to increase (Wong, 1998a, 2009). His autobiographical book *Man’s Search for Meaning* still speaks to new generations of readers.

You will appreciate the contributions of Viktor Frankl even more if you compare his logotherapy with the American vision of the good life as championed by Martin Seligman.

**The American Vision of the Good Life**

1. The American positive psychology movement was born in a time of peace and prosperity.
2. It focuses on what is right and good about people.
3. The primary concern: the pursuit of personal happiness and success.
4. Martin Seligman’s PERMA: positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011).
5. Meaning is one of the five independent elements of PERMA; it is defined as devoting to something larger than oneself.
6. American PP emphasizes activities that involve emotion, cognition and action.
7. Flourishing and well-being for self and others can be achieved through activities designed to enhance each of the five autonomous elements.

**Viktor Frankl’s Vision of the Good Life**

1. Logotherapy was born in a time of war and suffering.
2. It focuses on both what is wrong and what is right, emphasizing the human potential for living a meaningful and responsible life.
3. The primary concern: the pursuit of meaning and responsibility.

4. The 3 basic tenets of Frankl's logotherapy: freedom of will, will to meaning, and meaning of life.
5. Meaning is the foundation for survival and flourishing as well as one's overarching life orientation; all other elements of flourishing are organically and inherently linked to meaning.
6. Logotherapy emphasizes the spiritual core and self-transcendence.
7. Flourishing and well-being for self and others can be achieved through awakening and discovering responsibility, meaning and self-transcendence, and living at higher spiritual levels.

### **Contrast between the Two Visions**

- Normal circumstances vs. Extreme or noxious situations
- What I can get from life vs. What life demands of me
- Individualistic vs. Collectivistic
- Molecular vs. Holistic
- Bottom-up vs. Top-down
- Outside-in vs. Inside-out
- Cognitive-behavior vs. Existential-spiritual

### **Integrating the Two Approaches**

- Different assumptions, worldviews, life orientations and approaches.
- They complement each other but have very different implications for how to live and how to conduct therapy.
- Only empirical research can determine which approach is better in various situations.
- Generally, the meaning approach is most appropriate to extreme life circumstances where people's meaning systems are tested or shattered.
- The meaning approach integrates and adapts happiness-inducing and strength-enhancing exercises but places priority on exercises designed to awaken and fulfill meaning and responsibility.

### **The Spiritual Core**

- The noetic dimension of the human spirit contains our healthy spiritual core.
- The spiritual core is characterized by uniquely human attributes, such as meaning, self-transcendence, conscience, virtue, laughter, truth, goodness and beauty, goal-striving, commitment and responsibility.
- The spiritual core remains healthy, but it can be blocked existential anxieties, worldly concerns, and materialistic pursuits.
- Logotherapy seeks to remove the blockages and awaken the will to meaning.
- We are capable of squeezing meaning from life and turning suffering into triumph.

### **Self-Transcendence**

The human capacity for self-transcendence is an important key to living a meaningful and spiritual life. It is based on our spiritual core. It also represents an overarching life orientation rather than a tool to achieve meaning in life.

Lukas (1984) defines self-transcendence as “our ability to reach beyond ourselves to people we love to causes that are important to us” (p. 34).

Frankl defines self-transcendence as the essence of existence: “Being human is being directed to something other than itself” (Frankl, 1969/1988, p. 50).

According to Frankl (1984), self-actualization is achieved to the extent that a person commits himself or herself to the fulfillment of his life meaning. “In other words, self-actualization cannot be attained if it is made an end in itself, but only as a side effect of self-transcendence” (p. 175).

### **Importance of Meaning**

*“A strong will to meaning promotes human health, both physically and mentally, and prolongs, as well as preserves, life”* (Graber, 2004, p. 65).

- You may achieve high scores in PERMA but life can still remain empty if you have not experienced meaning in the five major domains of life as conceptualized by Viktor Frankl (see the Meaningful Living Scale for Lesson 4).
- You will find life satisfying only when you discover and experience meaning in life, relationship, work, suffering and death (Meaningful Living Scale).
- Meaning provides the reasons for living and the basis for well-being, happiness and health.

**Existential Vacuum:** A general sense of meaninglessness and inner void typically manifest itself in a state of boredom, but persistent and serious types of meaninglessness is related to tragic triad and neurotic triad.

**Tragic Triad:** pain, guilt and death

**Neurotic Triad:** depression, aggression and addiction

### **Viktor Frankl’s Three Basic Tenets**

#### **Freedom of Will**

(Covered in the Lesson 3)

- The demand to exercise personal responsibility and human agency.
- A sense of responsibility is a prerequisite for living an authentic life.
- We are responsible for making choices regarding our future.
- Four types of misuse of responsibility: relinquishing it, abusing it, overstepping it, and depriving others of their responsibility.
- We have an inner mandate from our spiritual core to ask more important questions: “How should we live?” or “How do I ought to do with my life?”
- An authentic person must take a stand and make a choice in spite of fear and anxiety.

#### **Will to Meaning**

Human beings are not driven primarily by drives and instincts but drawn forward by the pursuit of meaning (Frankl, 1969).

- The will to meaning is predicated on the freedom of will and a sense of responsibility.
- The will to meaning is a primary motivation.
- It is a basic drive that compels us but it is also a future attraction—to pursue something that we really care about.

- In order to fulfill the will to meaning, individuals need to be prepared psychologically for suffering and death.
- To challenge a person with a potential meaning to fulfill can help trigger the will to meaning (Frankl, 1985).

### **The Ultimate Concern**

- It makes a great difference whether one's primary objective in life or ultimate concern is meaning and virtue, or happiness and success.
- King Solomon's book of Ecclesiastes makes it very clear that one can gain the whole world and indulge in all one's desires and still find life empty.
- A meaning-mindset and a happiness-mindset dictates very different life principles and choices.

### **Meaning of Life**

- The meaning of life is unique and specific to each person.
- Frankl (1963) emphasizes the discovery rather than the creation of personal meaning.
- "The meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves, but rather detected" (p. Frankl, 1963, p.133).
- Meaning of life includes both situational and ultimate meaning (Frankl, 1985).
- The search for meaning has to be based on authenticity and time-tested values.

The underlying assumption is that meaning can only be detected through one's reflection on life experiences, in addition to active engagement in the world and with people. Furthermore, one cannot create meaning without any reference to horizontal and vertical values. Personal meaning needs are based in universal and time-proven values. In the spiritual realm, meaning and values are closely related.

Situational meaning refers to the moment-to-moment specific demands from each situation. The ultimate meaning refers to how we fit into the larger scheme of things such as the eight existential questions in the Quest for Meaning Scale from the Lesson 3.

According to Fabry (1998):

People's lives will be meaningful to the extent their human spirit is able to tune in on the "Ultimate Meaning" (Frankl, 1985, p. 141) in the suprahuman dimension of the Spirit (with a capital S). Frankl translated the word *logos* both with "spirit" and "meaning." The biblical passage "In the beginning was *logos*, and *logos* was with God, and *logos* was God," to Frankl meant: In the beginning was Meaning, it is the center of the universe and calls out to people to discover it. It is the ultimate demand of life. (pp. 297-298)

The existence of ultimate meaning cannot be proved, except in the experience of living. The proof does not come from reaching a definite answer, but lies in the fulfillment that comes from the process of search. (Fabry, 1987, xv).

### **Ultimate Meaning**

- We never hope to grasp ultimate meaning in its totality.
- We can never fully understand ultimate meaning because it is a matter of continued pursuit and incremental understanding, but having a sense of one's calling, no matter how vague, is an important guiding light in decision-making and discovering the meaning of the moment.

- When our spiritual call is connected with the demands of ultimate meaning, we discover our calling.
- A musician says that I did not choose music, music chose me. A pastor may say, I did not choose the ministry, the ministry chose me or God called me.

Fabry (1998) pointed out the calls of meaning as a fourth tenet implicit in the above three: “Life challenges individuals with demands to which they have to respond if they are to live a fulfilled life” (p. 297). Thus, one’s primary concern is to discover and surrender to the call of meaning.

The significance of this meaning-orientation needs to be fully grasped in order to live a truly fulfilling life, because it entails the development of a meaning mindset as a frame of reference for looking at each event and life as a whole.

### **The Meaning Triangle: Three Pathways to Meaning**

Frankl (1985) suggested three ways of finding meaning:

1. Giving or contributing something to the world through our work
2. Experiencing something or encountering someone
3. Choosing a courageous attitude towards unavoidable suffering.

This deceptively simple formulation actually contains a great deal of wisdom and clinical implications. The creative pathway to meaning emphasizes the human being as a responsible, creative, and free agent capable of self-regulation, self-determination, and goal-striving. It also implies that the meaningful life is an achieving life – that each person has the opportunities to develop their potentials and achieve something significant.

The experiential pathway is even richer in its implications. If the creative pathway focuses on giving gifts through the work you do, the experiential pathway focuses on receiving gifts from life. It means savouring every moment of the day and appreciating the gifts of relationships and gifts from nature. Our lives are enriched when we are mindful of whatever happens to us and around us. It means that we are open to all that life has to offer with sensitivity and gratitude, even when life hurts.

The attitudinal pathway is especially important in situations of unavoidable suffering. Frankl (1969) claimed:

This is why life never ceases to hold meaning, for even a person who is deprived of both creative and experiential values is still challenged by a meaning to fulfill, that is, by the meaning inherent in the right, in an upright way of suffering. (p. 70)

Attitudinal values are probably the most important to human survival and flourishing in times of adversity and tragedy. It refers to the defiant human spirit to go deeper, higher, and broader – digging deeper into one’s inner resources, reaching higher for hope and inspiration, and reaching out to connect with other suffering people. This attitude is also based on the belief that an individual life cannot be destroyed if it is devoted to something bigger, higher, and more long-lasting than oneself. Having the right attitude towards suffering and life indicates that one has reflected on one’s life experiences and learnt to make sense of the difficulties, predicaments, and paradoxes of life. Logotherapy recognizes that every crisis is an opportunity for personal

transformation and developing a mature worldview. Clients are helped to revise their assumptions and attitudes so that they can adapt better to one's life circumstances.

### **Exercises**

1. Keep in mind Frankl's challenge of asking yourself what life demands of you instead of what you demand from life. Write a concise mission statement for your career or for your life.
2. Set one or two realistic achievable life goals that are consistent with your mission statement and core values.

## References

- Adler, A. (1931/1958). *What life should mean to you*. New York, NY: Capricorn Books.
- Fabry, J. (1998). *The cause of meaning*. In P. T. P. Wong & P. S. Fry (Eds.), *The human quest for meaning* (pp. 295-305). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Frankl, V. E. (1963). *Man's search for meaning*. New York, NY: Pocket Books.
- Frankl, V. E. (1969/1988). *The will to meaning: Foundations and applications of logotherapy*. New York, NY: The World Publishing Co.
- Frankl, V. E. (1984). *Man's Search for Meaning: An introduction to logotherapy*. New York, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Frankl, V. E. (1985). *Man's search for meaning (Revised and updated)*. New York, NY: Washington Square Press.
- Frankl, V. E. (1986). *The doctor and the soul: From psychotherapy to logotherapy (Revised and expanded)*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Graber, A. V. (2004). Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy: Method of Choice in Ecumenical Pastoral Psychology, 2nd e.d. Lima, OH: Wyndham Hall Press.
- James, W. (1902). *The varieties of religious experience: A study of human nature*. London, UK: Longmans, Green.
- Jung, C. G. (1933). *Modern man in search of a soul* (W. S. Dell & C. F. Baynes, Trans.). San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanich.
- Lao Tzu. (1913). *Tao Te Ching "The Canon of Reason and Virtue"*, translated by D. T. Suzuki and Paul Carus. Retrieved from <http://www.yellowbridge.com/general/invoke.php?u=http://www.sacred-texts.com/tao/crv/>.
- Lukas, E. (1998). The meaning of life and the goals in life for chronically ill people. In P. T. P. Wong & P. S. Fry, *The human quest for meaning* (pp. 307-316). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Maslow, A. (1962). *Toward a psychology of being*. New York, NY: Van Nostrand.
- May, R. (1958). The origins and significance of the existential movement in psychology. In R. May, E. Angel, & H. F. Ellenberger (Eds.), *Existence* (pp. 3-36). Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Seligman, M. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Wong, P. T. P. (1998a). The endurance of logotherapy. *The International Forum for Logotherapy*, 21.
- Wong, P. T. P., & Fry, P. S. (Eds.). (1998). *The human quest for meaning: A handbook of psychological research and clinical applications*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Wong, P. T. P. (2009). Viktor Frankl: Prophet of hope for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In A. Batthyany & J. Levinson (Eds.), *Anthology of Viktor Frankl's Logotherapy*. Phoenix, AZ: Zeig, Tucker & Theisen Inc.