

Following the Bread Crumbs to the End of Ultimate Meaning

Avraham Cohen

City University of Seattle, Vancouver BC

This paper looks into the old idea that the unexamined life is not worth living. Inquiry focuses on personal experience, moments derived from the practice of psychotherapy, wisdom from some masters, and reference to altered states and spiritual vision. The idea of personal meaning construction and Ultimate Meaning are held up alongside each other. The idea of the writing itself as part of the inquiry is addressed. The search for Ultimate Meaning is pursued.

Crumbs Along the Way

I am a psychotherapist in private practice. This practice of secluded and protected intimacy suits me. I also teach in a post-graduate counselling program at a university. I completed a doctorate in 2006 at the age of 64 at the University of British Columbia in the Center for Cross-Faculty Inquiry in the Faculty of Education. My dissertation inquired into the human dimension in educational environments and the inner life of the educator (Cohen, 2006). I am a regular meditator. I run, lift weights, and do yoga. I live with my most intimate friend in a rewarding and intense relationship. I maintain various close friendships, which are variously worthwhile, supportive, and challenging. I have hobbies. My life is full by most standards. I experience my life as having personal meaning. I am very interested in the idea that this experience does not necessarily mean that my life actually matters. Here is my secret; I would really like to find Ultimate Meaning. I would like to know once and for all, what it's all about. Viktor Frankl (2000) says:

But once we start dealing with an overall meaning we soon meet a law that I would like to formulate as follows: *The more comprehensive the meaning, the less comprehensible it is.* And if it comes to *ultimate meaning*, it necessarily is beyond comprehension. (p. 143)

Central to this idea of Ultimate Meaning is the experience of vital energy, a life force, which includes the idea of meaning, but it is a meaning that is embodied, by which I mean there is a sense of knowing that is felt emotionally and physically. This type of vitality to which I refer is consistent with Daoist and Buddhist teachings. In the branches of Daoism that are practice based the cultivation of qi energy is core. My understanding of this energy from research that is both academic and personal is that this is an eternal energy and something that is present in everything, and the only question is whether I am in touch with it or not. If I am, there is nothing to do (wu-wei) and if I am not, then I must first notice this and then do what is needed in order to come back into contact with the Dao-field.

In the ultimate scheme of everything I am here for such a brief instant in time, barely a dot between two enormous encyclopedic volumes of cosmic silence and oblivion. To me, that is incomprehensible. Is this what Frankl is talking about? My intention with this paper is to look into the “knowing” of Ultimate Meaning and to provide the reader with a glimpse into my process and experience. Complete knowing of Ultimate Meaning, if indeed such a possibility exists, would mean the end of the quest and any distinctions of this sort.

The idea that it’s all over in a flash and that I really never understood what it was all about scares me in the depths of my bones. I am forever watching for the trail of crumbs to Ultimate Meaning. I hope that Ultimate Meaning is leaving me crumbs and reaching down the path for me.

Meaning

A distinction must be made between meaning and meaningfulness. This latter might better be written as ‘meaning-fullness.’ The former seems to refer to an attribution that I make to experience, while the latter suggests that an experience is only what it is and the meaning is not a cognized and separate event. Rather, the phenomenon and the ‘knowing’ of meaning come as a whole and are reminiscent of the first chapter of the Dao-de-ching, which in its essence says that whatever you can say about it is not what it is. I have created a rendering of this first chapter (Cohen, in press):

There is an energy that precedes and is intrinsic to all action, intention, corporeality, and materiality.

This energy can be spoken of but this speaking must not be confused with the energy itself, which by definition must be experienced directly to be known.

Thoughts that take possession of consciousness will obscure the Dao;
The life-force that animates all things.

Dao and the world are continuous.
The world is the Dao in form
And the Dao is both precursor to and present in form.

Description of Dao tends towards removal from Dao.
Living the Dao in the moment is True.

The search for meaning-fullness is in my view consistent with this rendering and much of what most people do is in the service of not addressing what I am trying to capture in this verse and in this paper. Activity is undertaken and personality formed to defend against the fear of the underlying big questions about life and meaning. Addiction is a great example of individuals and groups seeking spirit by altering their brain chemistry. Of course, they are not likely saying this is what they are doing. Many will say that they just like to be busy. Some will say they have an addiction or an illness; any language that supports a belief about *not being able to be responsible* and about not wanting to be idle, which translates, in my view, into not wanting to be with their own sense of *beingness* or *isness*. The process of a change to taking responsibility is characterized by Camus, the French existential philosopher and quoted by Watts (1999), “The only serious philosophical problem is whether or not to commit suicide (p. 30).” As soon as the question is acknowledged and you and I do not take our own lives, responsibility for

being alive and questions about meaning come to the foreground. We are then left with responsibility for how we will live, and I believe, the further responsibility for inquiry into Ultimate Meaning.

What creates meaning? Alfried Längle (ECPS Colloquium, UBC, February 3, 2005) stated, “a meaning that counts must be felt.” He went on to attribute to Viktor Frankl the following, “I take everything as a question to myself.” These two ideas describe ways of being and experiencing that have helped make life very interesting for me, but I am still left with a question—what difference does it really make? Upon reflection, I have, at times, felt that it’s merely about passing time and either having fun¹ or not, but in the end the time will pass and I will look back and decide on a cost-adjusted basis if this was a good-enough life. Even if I decide that it was, it will still end. I will be gone. Some may remember me, but I will still be in oblivion, forever, at least this is my best guess for now. I know there are alternative explanations and I would be glad to have an experience that convinces me it is other than oblivion that awaits me.

Viktor Frankl (2000) suggests three dimensions from which meaning arises:

[I]f we investigate how the man in the street goes about finding meaning it turns out that there are three avenues that lead up to meaning fulfillment: First, doing a deed or creating a work; second, experiencing something or encountering someone; in other words, meaning can be found not only in work but also in love. Most important, however, is the third avenue: Facing a fate we cannot change, we are called upon to make the best of it by rising above ourselves and growing beyond ourselves, in a word, by changing ourselves. (pp. 141-142)

In my own life, I have encountered many experiences that fit with these three ways. First, I have been most fortunate to be paid in situations where the match between who I seem to be and what I am to do is fortuitous. My work life has mostly been indistinguishable from play. Second, I have had many incredible encounters with both things and people. My most profound example is my relationship with my most intimate friend and partner in almost all things. Third, I was afflicted with ulcerative colitis from the age of fourteen. As an adolescent, I was angry, ashamed, and bemoaned my “unfair” fate. Through this life-long experience, I have learned to be incredibly sensitive to myself and to others, face a fate that was not always controllable, and to look deeply into the meaning of my experiences. In response to having this “ally” I questioned, “Why me?” I eventually saw through focusing on this question that this was the wrong question. What emerged was a different inquiry. How can I live under the conditions that exist “in, for, and with” (Moustakas, 1995) my life?

All of my experiences have contributed to a life of intensity and meaning. The question still remains: Am I just good at finding ways of making life fun and entertaining; ways that help me avoid dealing with a void in the dimension of Ultimate Meaning? I’m haunted by still more questions: Is there something that I am missing? If so, what is it?

¹ By fun I do not necessarily mean levity (although, I am very favourable to exuberance). I mean the ascription of meaning that derives from a sensory-based experience combined with the perception that “this” matters.

The Psychotherapy Container

I listen to those who come to see me and hear both reflection and counterpoint to my own experience. As I sit with my clients like all psychotherapists I hear a variety of tales of woe, despair, and even triumphs. What I hear tells me that I am not alone in my wondering and longing. I listen to what is said, but really I am listening most intently for what is not said and often for that for which there is no awareness of the absence. It's neither trauma nor repressed memory. How can someone suppress experience that they never had? Often I am told how the "loving" environment within which a person grew up involved a divorce, alcoholism, benign neglect, criticism, fear of someone's anger, etc. I ask, "How did you know you were loved with all these things going on?" I hear, "I was told that I was loved." I ask, "What do you mean by love?" The question itself invariably turns out to be confounding. My clients missed experiences of authentic love, attention, acceptance, bonding, and encouragement.

Experiences of what is missing with the associated feelings of longing, emptiness, alienation, and despair are potential doorways into the mystery. These painful experiences are generally perceived as undesirable, unwanted, and horrible. This is the otherness that is not invited in, rejected, reviled, and despised. It is not without precedent to suggest as I do that the doors of perception are represented by that which is most feared and unwanted. In *Journey to Ixtlan* (Castaneda, 1972) in the chapter *Death is an Advisor* we read:

Death is our eternal companion.... It is always to our left, at an arm's length.... it whispered in your ear and you felt its chill.... It has always been watching you. It always will until the day it taps you. (p. 33)

The thing to do when you're impatient ... is to turn to your left and ask advice from your death....

Death is the only wise advisor that we have.... nothing really matters outside its touch. Your death will tell you, 'I haven't touched you yet.' (p. 34)

Personally I have been working all my life to learn how to thank fate for providing doorways to the eternal with the dream that "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern" (Blake, 1975, Plate 14). The narrow chinks presented themselves at various points in my life. Each chink was guarded by a savage beast that terrified me. On reflection I do not know what moved me to meet the beasts rather than run, not that I have never run, but eventually as the following story reveals, a choice has to be made:

A certain master was sitting in his hut having tea. Suddenly he heard a terrible screeching. There was a banging on his door. He went to the door. He smelt a foul sulphuric odour. Opening the door, he encountered three fire-breathing dragons. He looked at them with eyes wide open. They looked at him. He said, "Would you like to come in for tea?" The dragons said, "Yes." They entered, still breathing foul breath and flames. He invited them to sit down. He proceeded to pour tea. Finally, one of the dragons said, "Aren't you afraid of us?" The master replied, "Yes, but if I run away, you will chase me, and if I manage to escape you will surely return again and I will certainly have to run again. I prefer to meet you directly, get to know you, and find out what we might have to offer each other. (source lost from my consciousness)

Aldous Huxley in *The Doors of Perception & Heaven and Hell* (1994) says, “The urge to transcend self-conscious selfhood is a principal appetite of the soul” (p. 46). Without going into the details of Huxley’s experiences with mescaline, it seems that his essential interest was the search for enlightenment. Certainly, he sees transcendence as the “goal,” which seems to equate with personal liberation. He feels that religion will not supply the desired experience. For many, including me, the experience of transcendence was not in the field in any obvious way as I was growing up, or was it? I was exposed to a light taste of the Jewish religion. I didn’t ask for more.

There is an idea in Zen, the *Gateless Gate*. On first glance this seems to suggest that this is a doorway that will not and cannot open, but what it is really suggesting is that the apparently undesirable and the very difficult offer an entrance into a deeper sense of presence, life, and being. In Zen the method is sitting, sitting with and in the experience. There is no intent to do anything other than be with this bit of life as it is happening. As Arnold Mindell (1991, pp. 84–85) says, “even if you are submerged in some difficult piece of fate, you ... can go deeper into the message and story of suffering.” I think it is fair to say that a medicalized and pathologizing culture delivers a consistent and persistent message that if we are having a painful experience then there is something wrong and the only major task is to right this wrong by getting rid of the experience. For example, in psychiatry and psychology the term *anxiety disorder* is well known and earns major listings in the *DSM-IV-R*, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The approach to these disorders is essentially to eradicate them or at least lessen their effect on a person. Initially when Freud talked about anxiety he viewed it as a signal that something was wrong and not the problem. Now the major approach to anxiety involves its eradication, eradication of the signal. The *Gateless Gate* suggests that anxiety is a way into a deeper knowing and being. To be clear I am not suggesting that a change in symptoms or signals would not be appreciated. What I am saying based on my own experience and those of my clients is that viewing these signals and symptoms as an invitation to look into their experience rather than run from it, offers two profound possibilities:

1. a greater knowing about life and being, and
2. a change in the signal that comes as a ‘side-effect’ of meeting the dragons head on.

At age eleven I had the following experience, for which I cannot identify any antecedent. I was lying in bed. My brother was in his bed beside me. I am not sure if he was awake or asleep. He tells me he does not recall the following events. I felt inspired and began to explain something that seemed absolutely self-evident, how everything was connected to everything. I can still remember the feeling. This was an initiatory experience. I have been watching out for the crumbs ever since.

Ultimate Meaning and the Invisible Pathway

I have written this paper with the hope that I will discover something that I have not previously found. At this point I am caught in my own personal möbius loop. I do not know myself outside this domain. I must transcend the self that I am that is inside the loop and become the self that has the capacity to step outside the loop. This self must have a consciousness that is expanded beyond its current limit. I simultaneously feel

fearful and excited; excited that at this very moment I am at the brink of great possibility and fearful that nothing creative will emerge. I feel tension in the pit of my stomach. As I write, drops of sweat are forming in the small of my back. What if it really is all random and meaningless? I am a meaning-making animal. I can as easily rationalize that there is no basis for Ultimate Meaning as its opposite. I have to face the possibility that all questions I have about existence have no answer. I want there to be Ultimate Meaning. Don't you? As I am writing these last sentences, the tension increases.

Krishnamurti (1991) tells us in a chapter titled, *Is There a Meaning to Life*, "If we are to inquire into this very deeply, there must be great doubt" (p. 192). I believe he is telling us that to experience "Living Inquiry" (K. Meyer, personal communication, September 9, 2004), there has to be an openness to any question. No evidence that contradicts my wishes must be ignored or denied. Only by being completely willing to give it all up and be smashed to pieces is there any hope at all of finding Ultimate Meaning. I feel the pulls and pushes at the edges of my heart.

I understand Living Inquiry to mean that I live fully into the inquiry, that the inquiry itself is alive and lively, and that literally I live a life of inquiry into life's meaning, which requires that I be open to all possibilities, including the one I like the least, namely, that there is only meaning construction and no Ultimate Meaning. I don't like the cold chill in the pit of my stomach that accompanies this possibility as it appears in my consciousness. Rilke (1932/1993) plays on the theme of Living Inquiry:

... be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the *questions themselves* like the locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps, you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some day into the answer. Perhaps you do carry within yourself the possibility of shaping and forming as a particularly happy and pure way of living; train yourself to it — but take whatever comes with great trust, and if only it comes out of your own will, out of some need of your inmost being, take it upon yourself and hate nothing. (p. 35)

I seek ways of being and ways of accessing those ways of being that allow for optimal potential to find that which I am seeking. I must follow some guidance system with the clear understanding that it could all be just as the Red Queen says, "Words mean exactly what I say they mean." Don Juan (Castaneda, 1968) says:

All paths are the same: they lead nowhere.... Before you embark on any path ask the question: Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't, it is of no use. Both paths lead nowhere; but one has a heart, the other doesn't. One makes for a joyful journey; as long as you follow it, you are one with it. The other will make you curse your life. One makes you strong; the other weakens you. (p. 106)

I fear that I could spend my whole life and not even discover that there is no path to be on. Words themselves are like a veil between me and another reality. How do I stay conscious and out of the discursive realm? Glimpses appear between breaths. Those instants of silence when something else show itself; something I cannot name for the naming itself separates me from it.

This formulation of path aligns with awareness of contact with the flow of the Dao-Field² (Cohen & Bai, 2006), which is not to be confused with the usual way this is framed, “being in the Dao.” The Dao field is perennial. It is only a matter of whether I am in touch with this reality. If I am, there is nothing to be done. If I am not, I have two tasks. The first is to notice that I am out of touch, which is not always easy, and the second, is to do whatever is necessary to be back in touch. When I am in the “right” relationship with the Dao-Field (on the Path with Heart), the Ultimate Meaning seems nearby and when I am not I cannot even formulate the question properly.

I have some questions to leave with you:

1. How can your consciousness be trained to stay awake through the next “birth” out of this current life “construction” and into the Void?
2. How can you feel the stillness in movement and the movement in stillness?
3. How can you realize that you are what you believe you are not?
4. How can you become one with Ultimate Meaning and know it as yourself?
5. What is the practice to move you towards becoming One with everything, including Ultimate Meaning?

I feel I am on the edge of knowing something beyond what I usually know; something for which I have no words. I cannot tell you. I can be as Moustakas (1995) says, *in, with and for you*, and we can accompany each other in these prepositional ways. I recommend our I-Thou (Buber, 1970) encounter, having intense relationships, a life filled with adventure, connection with the Dao-field, and being on the path of living inquiry as a way to have a sense of meaning while following the bread crumbs in the direction of Ultimate Meaning.

² But, what actually flows here? Is not the *dao-field* simply empty, a place where there is nothing? For the *Daoist* practitioners, the empty *dao-field* is full of *qi* vital energy (In common usage, *qi* means both ‘air’ or ‘breath’ and ‘energy’. As a philosophical understanding, *qi* is the basic “substance” of the entire cosmos, including human beings.) *Qi* is dynamic: it flows, moves, increases, decreases, and so on. (p. 12)

References

- American Psychiatric Association (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders DSM-IV-TR (Text Revision)*. Washington: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Blake, W. (1975). *The marriage of heaven and hell*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University.
- Buber, M. (1970). *I and thou*. Charles Scribner and Sons.
- Castaneda, C. (1968). *The teaching of Don Juan: A Yaqui way of knowledge*. New York: Ballantyne.
- Castaneda, C. (1972). *Journey to Ixtlan: The lessons of Don Juan*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Cohen, A. (in press). *Gateway to the Dao-Field: Essays for the Awakening Educator*. Youngstown, NY: Cambria.
- Cohen, A. (2006). *Attending to the inner life of an educator: The human dimension in education*. Doctoral thesis, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC.
[available at <https://dspace.library.ubc.ca/dspace/handle/2429/63> 📄]
- Cohen, A., & Bai, H. (2006, February). Dao and Zen in the classroom: Now and then the alchemical vessel gets hot. Paper presented at the WestCAST 2006: The Languages of Learning, Vancouver, BC.
- Frankl, V. (2000). *Man's search for ultimate meaning*. New York: Perseus. (Original work published 1948)
- Huxley, A. (1994). *The doors of perception and Heaven and hell*. London: Flamingo. (Original work published 1954)
- Krishnamurti, J. (1991). *Meeting life: Writings and talks on finding your path without retreating from society*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Mindell, A. (1991). *Inner dreambody work: Working on yourself alone*. Portland, OR: Lao Tse Press. (Original work published 1990)
- Moustakas, C. (1995). *Being-in, being-for, being-with*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Rilke, R. M. (1993). *Letters to a young poet* (M. D. H. Norton, Trans.). New York: W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1932)
- Watts, A. (1999). *The culture of counter culture* (M. Watts, Ed.). Boston: Tuttle.

Psychotherapist and educator of counsellors, Avraham Cohen is noted for his whole-person and deeply democratic-community approach to classroom pedagogy. His academic and pedagogical expertise and innovation have been valorized by the British Columbia Association of Clinical Counsellors that awarded him the 2007-08 President's Award for Contribution to the Discipline. This award is given for "distinguished contributions to the discipline of counselling through exemplary academic efforts." Cohen also received the Canadian Counselling Association 2008 Professional Article of the Year Award for his co-authored article, "Suffering Loves and Needs Company: Daoist and Buddhist Perspectives on the Counsellor as Companion."

His forthcoming book from Cambria Press, *Gateway to the Dao-Field: Essays for the Awakening Educator* [excerpted in this issue of *AntiMatters*] evolved from Avraham Cohen's doctoral dissertation, for which he received the 2006-07 Ted Aoki Prize for the Outstanding Dissertation in Curriculum Studies from the University of British Columbia.

Contact information: acohen@cityu.edu