

# How One Finds Meaning in Life Both Externally and Internally

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## Abstract

This paper goes over how one may attain fulfillment in their life through either internal or external means. In our everyday life, we see two polar opposite types of people, those who gain fulfillment through things like societal success, money, and recognition, and those who gain fulfillment through internal peace, the smaller moments in life, and understanding. In this paper we will examine both lifestyles, what drives a person to choose one over another, and how these lifestyles lead a person's decisions to get them to the ultimate end. This essay will hopefully help those in life gain some perspective and make their own decisions.

## Introduction

In this paper I will examine how one seeks to find meaning in their life with either external or internal resources, examining Hinduism and Buddhism for how one may attain internal meaning, and taking a look at case studies and stories of characters and peoples lives to see how they may have gone about finding and fulfilling their meaning of life.

For the purposes of this paper, the concept of personal void will be defined as something that one may live to regret later in their life. In contrast, fulfillment means living a life with no regrets. At the end of one's life if they are looking back and regretting the way they lived or wishing they had done something differently, they have not lived a fulfilling life

I will reference religious texts such as the *Dhammapada* and *Ramayana* as well as fictional writing including *Vagabond*, *Berserk*, and *Naruto*, all three of which are Japanese comic books. Furthermore I will be referencing Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Illich*, Alber Camus' *The Stranger*, and *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*. For the purposes of this paper I will be examining the fulfillment of an individual within themselves and not an individual in society. Of course we cannot deny the existence of the rest of the world so it may play a factor, but the main

focus will be on personal fulfillment. As you may have noticed I am mostly using sources of Eastern influence in this paper. This is of course, not to discredit literature of western influence, it's just that for this topic I found that Asian and European literature was more fitting.

### **Importance**

This topic has importance as I think it is something that provides guidance and information on some of the ways one may gain fulfillment in their life, as well as delving into the idea that there is such a thing as fulfillment in life. For those of us who spend our days pondering why we even exist in the first place, or whether what we are doing in this moment is actually worth anything may benefit from understanding both sides of living a fulfilling life. One where a person focuses solely on the aesthetic, materialistic, and selfish way of living, constantly chasing “success” and meaning from the outer world. and another where the individual focuses on detaching themselves from such materialistic and earthly desires in order to achieve enlightenment and freedom from their unnecessary feelings. One where mindfulness and understanding are the key to fulfillment. The aesthetic is a way of life that is ruled by emotions and momentary wants, whereas the internal way of life is one ruled by the goal of enlightenment and detachment, it teaches a way of life in which one may attain inner peace and understanding of the things around us. While many people may argue one way of life over another, this paper’s purpose is not to argue any which way. It is a simple examination and case study of how different ways of life and the decisions one makes based on their personal philosophy have ended, and whether this can be considered fulfillment or not. The purpose for this paper, again, is to provide perspective on both ways of life and allow the reader to choose which way would be best for them. In the end I will, of course, give my personal opinion, but this should not disallow the reader from having a different opinion.

## Flow

In order to thoroughly explain my thoughts, I will first examine the external, explaining and connecting concepts from *The Death of Ivan Ilych* to the idea of selfishness and getting gratification and fulfillment from society. I will also be discussing *The Stranger* attempting to explain the aesthetic way of life and how that may shape one's actions and viewpoints on life. In an attempt to depict the contrast between the external and internal ways to fulfillment, and how one may change perspective from external to internal, I will be explaining the life of Musashi Miyamoto from *Vagabond* and highlighting the points at which his perspective on the meaning of life and fulfillment changed. In this section I will also briefly talk about *Ramayana* as it is a key story in Hinduism that is engineered to show humans how a fulfilling life should be lived. It contains a mix of both internal and external factors to personal fulfillment, however it mainly delves into what dharma is and how one should go about successfully maintaining their dharma in life. It is important to note that *Ramayana* does talk about how an individual should fill the roles they are put into in life. For example, it shows the responsibilities of a father, mother, son, daughter, leader, and more. *Ramayana* will be used in both the internal and external sections of the paper as the concept of dharma can be interpreted in multiple ways.

Next, I will examine the internal, discussing the *Dhammapada*, which goes over the detachment of one from their emotions and how that can lead to enlightenment. The *Dhammapada* talks about dharma and other concepts that are also popular in Hinduism, so there may be overlap when talking about the *Dhammapada* and *Ramayana*, however I will try to explain where I believe the differences lie in the common topics. *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom* which talks about the importance of being mindful and meditation in order to be more aware of

our own minds and the world around us. This will provide a more practical way to view internal fulfillment, as talking about abstract concepts can make the internal hard to understand.

Finally, given all the information I have presented I will provide my personal opinion on the matter as well as some experiences. Is there a right way? Can fulfillment be found internally, externally, or both?

## **External**

People who seek to find fulfillment in their lives externally can be found everywhere in modern society and literature. The most apparent types of people who try to find meaning through the external are modern capitalists and corporate business people who are after monetary gains. The most extreme cases, fully deny the possibility and importance of spirituality and believe that the only thing important in life, that gives it value, is social and socioeconomic status. Of course this extreme may not be very common, but it is important to keep in mind in order to have a clear point of comparison.

In many stories the case with this type of person is that they were lacking or deprived of materialistic things as children, and they grew up with a stubborn mindset of wanting that thing or item that they could never have. They may even go so far as to view everything around them as objects or items, even people. In other words, the personal void that they are trying to fill was initially set by the lack of some external thing.

One example of this can be found in the character of Griffith from *Berserk*, a Japanese comic book. Griffith is a character who grew up as a peasant, but with an ambition to have his own kingdom one day. As his character is explained throughout *Berserk* he would often get looked down on, which is why he had such a grandiose goal. He had various good qualities, fitting of a leader and was loved by many, however in his eyes everybody was nothing but a tool

in order for him to achieve his desired goal. To this end he held back nothing and sacrificed all that he had built in his life. When the time came for him to make a choice between attaining a kingdom by himself or keeping his lifelong friends, the choice was obvious. Due to his nature, beliefs, and the void he felt he had, he viewed his friends and relationships as nothing but tools to get him to where he wanted to go. To some this may seem like a good thing, as he was able to achieve his goal, however, it is important to note that due to him not valuing those close to him, he could never trust anyone and nobody could ever truly trust him. This led to him being lonely and seeking people he could relate to, but to no avail. In the end, due to him constantly wanting to achieve something materialistic, no matter the cost, even with his kingdom he felt no fulfillment. Even with a kingdom he was an empty shell of a person who was unhappy.

Another important thing to note about this character story is the cost at which he achieved his personal fulfillment, or attempted to achieve personal fulfillment. He sacrificed all of his friends and lifelong connections in order to achieve his goal but what about his friends? Surely they had goals, aspirations, and a meaning they wanted to find, but simply because they made friends with the wrong person, they were unable to find their own fulfillment. This is often the case in modern society as well for those who seek fulfillment via the external, especially in a capitalistic society. Because in our capitalistic society, in order for one person to have something there must be somebody else who does not have that money in order to give that thing any value. This concept can be applied to the character arc of Griffith perfectly. In order for him to find his own personal fulfillment, somebody else had to be sacrificed.

Of course, there are cases where people seek external fulfillment even if they don't have apparent reasons such as growing up poor or lacking something external. In the case of Ivan Ilych from *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, he grew up in a well settled household. He was raised in a

comfortable environment and never showed any signs of needing anything materialistic. He was raised in the most average way as described in the book. However he sought to be well liked and viewed in society. This can be considered external as it is something that the external world would be giving him in order for him to feel fulfilled. For example, in the book every action he takes is fueled by the motivation of having a peaceful life that is approved by society. As Ivan constantly changed his life and actions in order to live a life that society would approve of, it was clear that all his relationships and connections were artificial and only valued due to his outer image in society, or monetary worth to other people. For example, in the beginning of the book when he died, we saw the effects of the way he lived his life. His wife only viewed him as a source of income and security, his colleagues viewed his death as an open position in his office, while his children had a more or less indifferent demeanor towards his death. He had no valuable relationships with people that cared about him as a person, leaving him surrounded by people, yet alone in death.

An important thing to note is that throughout his entire life, Ivan was selfish, only doing things that benefited himself without as much empathy or care for others. For example, he got married to a beautiful woman without thinking too hard about it due to it being viewed as good in societal views and during his wife's pregnancy he went out to play bridge with his friends as dealing with his pregnant wife was too bothersome and detrimental to his happiness. From this it is clear that he was treated in death as he treated people throughout his life. His wife viewed him as nothing more than a person who brought home money, one line in the book even saying "She began to wish he would die; yet she did not want him to die because then his salary would cease. And this irritated her against him still more" (*The Death of Ivan Ilych*). He viewed her, a piece in a perfect picture that he would present to the world as his life. Ivan cared very much about

outward appearances, one line in *The Death of Ivan Ilych* described how much he values how he is viewed in society being, “Ivan Ilych’s chief pleasure was giving little dinners to which he invited men and women of good social position, and just as his drawing-room resembled all other drawing-rooms so did his enjoyable little parties resemble all other such parties” (*The Death of Ivan Ilych*).

However when forced to face the mortality of his life and look at it under a critical lens, Ivan Ilych realized that what he was after in life was meaningless, going on to say, “It is as if I had been going downhill while I imagined I was going up. And that is really what it was. I was going up in public opinion, but to the same extent life was ebbing away from me. And now it is all done and there is only death” (*The Death of Ivan Ilych*). My interpretation of this quote is that Ivan came to the conclusion that spending so much time on maintaining public image was essentially meaningless because no matter what everybody is going to get to the stage where there is only death.

Another great example of someone trying to find fulfillment from the external without any told reason, is *The Stranger*. The major difference with the stranger is that it can’t be linked to modern capitalism as *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and Griffith’s character arc in *Berserk* can. The story is narrated by Meursault, the protagonist, and it starts with his mother dying at a nursing home. The key thing to notice in this book is that Meursault does not give as much importance to his mother dying. During this point of the book I’m sure most who haven’t read the book would expect him to feel sad or upset that his mother died, however the main point that is highlighted during this point in the story is how he was annoyed and slightly guilty due to his boss’ reaction to him asking for some time off to go see his mother. There was little to no sorrow about the death of his mother. He even goes as far as to say, “Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday; I



can't be sure" (*The Stranger*). Furthermore, the day after his mother's funeral he goes on a date with Marie as if nothing major has happened which is something that he is sentenced to death for.

Meursault views the world in an indifferent perspective. He does not care about finding a greater meaning, nor does he see the purpose in caring about some things that most people would naturally care about, and he doesn't see importance in fitting into societal standards of "normal". The only things he cares about are things that can bring him pleasure. At this point you may be thinking, how could somebody like this possibly have any meaning even from the external? While he may not care about things that people would "normally" care about there were things that Meursault derived happiness from such as women and cigarettes, two things that bring him pleasure. Meursault is selfish like Ivan Ilych was selfish. They are both constantly seeking to be pleased, however the difference comes in where Meursault doesn't care about how he is perceived or how he interacts with the outside world, whereas that is the thing that Ivan Ilych gives the most importance. It is on this basis that Meursault was able to kill and not feel a thing, whereas Ivan Ilych would have at least considered his social position after the act. It is this lack of caring about the consequences that makes Meursault the perfect example of someone that lives in the aesthetic realm. He is only concerned with momentary pleasure, with no consideration for the future or anybody else. His way of life, one without any greater meaning other than the immediate desires, is also one that left him alone, despite how hard Marie tried to connect with him, he simply had no interest towards her past the physical.

But it would be a mistake to think that this was fulfilling to Meursault. While it is something that he cared about, once he was sent to jail he was able to live without these things.

While he did struggle initially, in the end he was able to forgo both cigarettes and sex. At this point he was empty with no desire at all, nor no care for anything.

Now it is also true that people may change throughout their life. One may start off by believing that the only path to fulfillment is through the external, and then change to believing that internal peace is the true way to personal fulfillment. Such is the case with Musashi Miyamoto from *Vagabond*. However, at this point in the essay I will be exclusively talking about the first half of the story, in which he thought that the only importance in life was to become “the greatest swordsman under the heavens” (*Vagabond*). To earn this title he went to extreme extents, going to war, leaving his hometown even after the war, fighting various masters across the land, and making all kinds of enemies just to get stronger and defeat them. The story of *Vagabond* depicts Musashi's relationship with his father and how this relationship enforces many of his decisions early on. He has a very competitive relationship with his father, who was deemed as one of the greatest swordsmen. Now one would think that the father would be a motivation to Musashi, motivating him to live up to his father's reputation, however due to the father's crude and competitive nature Musashi grows up to resent his father, wanting to prove that he is better than his father. This competitive hatred he has towards his father enables him to push his true self aside in order to go onto a dangerous journey to become the best swordsman in all the land.

However, this path eventually showed him the emptiness of striving to prove yourself to others. He does eventually prove that he is the best swordsman in all the land once he defeats sixty swordsmen at the same time. However, at the end of this long killing spree he finds that he no longer has anything to work for, and the death and destruction that he has caused in his path to become the best swordsmen is something that he cannot look back on with pride. He found that his relationships with his friends, and the value he had for the simple life is what is truly

fulfilling. Once he became the best he broke the shackles that had been holding his true self down since a young age, understanding the things that he truly values in life are not aligned with his current goals. He really cares about his relationships with his friends. He wants to be at inner peace, leaving a positive impact for people around him. What he does in order to fulfill this goal during the second half of the story will be discussed in the internal section of the essay.

The last thing I would like to bring up in the external section is *Ramayana*. This story is neither an advocate for the internal nor the external. It instead advocates a balance between the two with the concept of dharma. Dharma are the principles that one lives by and the responsibilities that one needs to fulfill. This includes but is not limited to all the roles one may need to fill in their life, such as son, daughter, father, mother, leader, servant, and many more. The idea of dharma says that if one is able to successfully fulfill their duties and maintain their principles, they will achieve salvation and become closer to God, which is the ultimate goal. In other words, being righteous is the way of life, it will bring you external and internal happiness. The world will view you highly, you will be praised, however unlike the kind of social admiration that Ivan Ilych was getting, this care and admiration will be genuine. Furthermore, you will get good karma, which will help you in attaining inner peace as you are getting closer to god. This is the basis upon which the story of *Ramayana* is built. Be righteous, and you will get closer to God, leading to inner peace through salvation. The external factor of this is, again fulfilling your dharma in order to achieve worldly success. Fulfilling your dharma can also be viewed as an internal source of fulfillment, as will be discussed in the internal section of the essay.

All of the cases we talked about in the external world have led to either no fulfillment, or a conversion of methods of finding meaning. Ivan Ilych and Meursault both lived life selfishly,

but in the end Ivan was able to understand that he made a mistake in the way that he lived his life, and he understood that he should have lived differently. However Meursault, did not think that he did anything wrong, as he is totally indifferent to the concepts of right and wrong. He did not think he did anything wrong, or he just didn't care enough to change anything about it. We also had people like Griffith and Musashi who had voids created by their pasts that they spent their lives trying to fill. The difference between them is that one was willing to sacrifice everything for their goal and the other realized half way through that this was a way of life that was not fulfilling to him, so he changed in order to accommodate his new found importance in life.

### **Internal**

We have discussed how people may attempt to fulfill their inner voids with external resources, such as societal acceptance, money, power, and sexual pleasure. Now I will attempt to discuss how some people try to find fulfillment within themselves, through things like being a good person and fulfilling your responsibilities. Instead of attaining something that will give you fulfillment, you would instead do things in order to be a good person which would in turn make you fulfilled. In this scenario the meaning to one's life is not something that is given to them or something that can be fulfilled by attaining some external resource, but it is something that one finds within themselves, through self exploration.

The *Dhammapada* is a guide which tells us how to live a good life. The point is to avoid evil, cultivate good and be free from violence and conflicts by having good principles and sticking to them. For example, in the *Dhammapada* Buddha says, "treat all beings with kindness and compassion, live honestly and righteously, control his sensual desires, speak the truth and live a sober upright life, diligently fulfilling his duties, such as service to parents, to his

immediate family and to those recluses and brahmans who depend on the laity for their maintenance” (*Dhammapada*). These are all things that are also talked about in the Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana. In many cultures, self control is the most important step to mastering oneself. If one is able to control their emotions, actions, and mind they will obtain peace. A person should deal with conflict with patience and forgiveness instead of hate and hostility, as this only serves to further the conflict and cycle of conflict. This same kind of situation was dealt with in *Naruto* when the protagonist, Naruto, had to deal with the villain, Pain. Pain’s ideology was that because the world had inflicted Pain to him, he should let the world feel Pain and inflict just as much Pain onto everybody else. As a child Pain lost his family to war and suffered many war crimes, losing many of his friends. With frustration and nobody to blame, he simply decided to take all his anger out on the entire world.

On the other hand, despite Naruto going through similar situations as Pain, he decided that he wanted to prove himself to people, and show that despite being dealt a hard hand at life, it is important to look forward with positivity and strength. Forgiving those that have made mistakes in the past and handling current problems with patience is the key to resolving conflict and living a fulfilling life. This ideology is proven to be right again and again in *Naruto* as we observe different character dynamics.

For example, Naruto and Sasuke are polar opposites. Again, given the same scenarios Sasuke chose to dedicate his life to revenge, wishing pain upon the people who hurt him and his family, whereas Naruto chose to forgive those that hurt him, try to move on with a clear mind, not harboring any hatred for those that wronged him.

In the story of *Naruto* this philosophy is central to the theme of the story as it is the reason that Naruto is able to gain the respect and admiration of his teammates and enemies. It is

because of his willingness to understand other people's situations, listen to them, and yet still be rock solid on his own principles, that he is able to have such a great impact on those around him and change their beliefs.

The concept of fulfilling one's duties to all those close to them, is a direct connection to dharma from *Ramayana* and *The Bhagavad Gita*. Dharma is a core idea in both stories and in the Dhammapada. While some may say that this is another form of external gratification, it is important to note that following and completing Dharma is not something someone does selfishly, it is instead a way of life which will lead to fulfillment. Again, referencing the definition of fulfillment that I had defined in the introduction, a fulfilling life is one in which a person would be able to look back on their life and not have any regrets.

Getting back into *Vagabond*, Musashi Miyamoto, decided to live his life differently after defeating sixty swordsmen, and was advised to look into the smaller things in life that could bring him happiness. For example his impact on other people. Instead of becoming the greatest swordsman under the heavens, he was told that he should find happiness through what he has and what he can do for other people. After taking some time to recover from his injuries, Musashi was faced by various competitors who wished to take his title from him. However, he no longer had the passion to keep fighting. So he decided to take his friend's advice and try to help a small village, through which he was able to help the village begin to harvest again. It was through this experience that Musashi found that he likes to help people.

It is important to understand that up until this point Musashi's only goal was to be deemed as the greatest swordsman. However, after seeing the destruction that he left in his road to achieving his goal, he was anything but proud. He realized that his goal was shallow, and therefore not fulfilling. He lived his life by himself in isolation for so long with the singular goal

of becoming the best was the only thing that he gave importance to, and when he no longer had that he had to take a hard look at his life and see where he could find some meaning to keep on living. In other words, at first Musashi was motivated by external factors, however after his major battle he realized he may have been wrong and switched his values in life.

The concept of dharma is loosely connected to finding fulfillment in life internally. One can argue that fulfilling dharma can be considered as external fulfillment. I do not think this is the case because the way that I view dharma is that you are doing something in order to be righteous and because it is your responsibility. You are doing what is right regardless of the circumstance, and that action may not feel fulfilling immediately, but you are still going to do it. Fulfilling dharma is not something somebody does for pleasure, but because it is right and that makes it, in my opinion, an internal fulfillment.

On the other hand, something that is not loosely connected to internal fulfillment is the idea of meditation. Meditation is something that is integral to both Buddhism and Hinduism. As a Hindu, I meditate every day before starting my day. The first thing that I do after showering and brushing my teeth, is meditate for ten to fifteen minutes. There are various reasons for this, the first being that I would like to deepen my connection with God. However this is not something that is applicable to everyone, so don't fret, there are more reasons. Secondly, slowing down the day at the beginning and taking some time to breath before you get caught up in the energies of the world, has always led to good things for me. Clearing my consciousness and just focusing on myself and my breathing has always allowed me to handle the situations of the world better. Thinking about myself in an objective sense helps me better understand myself as a person and how I am impacting the world around me as well. I do not deny my emotions or

thoughts but instead I accept them as a part of myself, understand that they exist, and try my best to practice self control so that my thoughts and emotions do not rule my decisions.

But please don't just take my word for it, Goldstein and Kornfield both think the same, according to their book *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*. In fact, Goldstein and Kornfield take this a step further, emphasizing that being mindful is not something that should be limited to the ten minutes in the morning, but is something that can be incorporated into our daily lives. When we eat, work, or do anything else if we just focus on our breath we will be able to better understand the constant streams of thoughts that are constantly entering and leaving our mind, helping us better understand ourselves, which will result in us having a more compassionate attitude towards ourselves, and by proxy everything around us. In the book the authors emphasize that having a more compassionate attitude towards our surroundings will help us to better understand the interconnectedness of all things. With this understanding we will be able to better empathize with the people around us. This will lead to less conflict, as we understand that emotions and thoughts are not independent, but in fact a reaction due to a chain of events that are out of our control. Conflicts do not happen because of random emotions, but instead they are due to a mix of events and causes that create the emotion within someone. This may lead them to act out in certain ways, however with mindfulness, awareness, and empathy we can avoid conflict and handle hatred with patience and understanding.

It is important to note that this is not something that will happen immediately or overnight. Achieving this level of mindfulness takes time, practice, and dedication. Truly understanding your own feelings is something that will be uncomfortable at first, because you may have to break your own preconceived notions of yourself and look at yourself, essentially,



emotionally bare naked, however this will be worth it as you will be able to not only better understand yourself, but also the world and people around you.

## **Conclusion**

If you are waiting for me to tell you that internal fulfillment is better than external fulfillment or vice versa, get ready for disappointment. Neither one of these options is truly the correct way for everybody. This may be due to the fact that there is no one meaning of life. Life has no cookie cutter template that you can stick everybody into and say that this is the meaning. This is due to the fact that everybody comes from different experiences, has different values, and views the world differently. Imagine going up to a capitalist and trying to explain to them why their goal of making money is something that is ultimately a fruitless effort because eventually they are going to die and all the money will be meaningless anyways. Doing this would be extremely selfish on your part, and based on *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, a misrepresentation of what it means to be mindful. Assuming you just met this person, you have no idea why this person is motivated to make money, you also have no idea why they put so much importance on external things like money. This would be going against the idea of seeking internal fulfillment, as you are causing conflict by not lacking awareness about the interconnectedness of all things.

Regardless of which path you choose, I think the most important thing is to make a decision. In this scenario there are three options, two extremes and one medium. You can either be a fully externally fulfilled person, who has every materialistic thing they could ever want or you can be a totally internal person who is in touch with themselves, their feelings, and their thoughts. Or you can find a happy medium, in which you still value materialistic things, however not to such an extent that you lose value for being mindful and fulfilling your dharma.

I personally choose the last one. My main reason for picking the last option is that the other two are either extremely difficult to integrate with modern society or not good for my mental health personally. I need to be mindful, it makes me feel like I have more control over my life and my actions as long as I maintain control over my thoughts and emotions. However, I don't want to go so extreme as to drop all materialistic joys in life and only delve into the idea of mindfulness like a monk.

Getting started on this journey is a hard task, there will be much trial and error, and it is very possible that you will take a wrong path, live to regret your decision, or change your choice completely but I still think this is a worthwhile decision to make. It will help you learn more about yourself, what you value, and who you are.

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