

## *Unfolding Wholeness — 2: Is Meaning Divinely Woven Into Reality?*

### Finding Meaning?

In a world that often feels fragmented and restless, the search for meaning is more than an intellectual exercise—it is a deeply spiritual journey. The longing for meaning is a sacred longing, woven into our very being. Whether we name it as the search for God, for love, for purpose, or for wholeness, this quest is at the heart of the contemplative life. Even when it starts as a philosophical search, the contemplative is likely to arrive at an intuitive spiritual insight rather than a merely intellectual one.

If meaning is something we receive rather than impose, then our role is not to force understanding but to cultivate openness—to listen, to watch, and to participate in the unfolding mystery. This chapter invites us not only to reflect on what meaning is but to attune ourselves to how meaning emerges in our lived experience.

#### **Is Meaning Just a Human Projection?**

The most common modern assumption is that meaning is something humans impose on a meaningless universe. This was the view of existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who described a world fundamentally empty of inherent meaning, where human beings must create meaning for themselves.

Yet, across cultures and centuries, humans have intuited meaning not as something they impose, but something encountered—discovered, rather than designed.

In John 1:1, the Gospel of John describes Christ as the Logos, often translated as the Word.



Threads of the Unseen—woven into the fabric of being

The Greek term Logos carries deep philosophical connotations, referring to the rational, ordering principle of the cosmos, as understood in Hellenistic thought. Meanwhile, the Word in the Jewish tradition evokes the creative and revelatory power of God's speech, as seen in Genesis and the prophets. Thus, when John proclaims:

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" — John 1:1*

he is drawing from both Greek and Jewish worldviews, affirming that meaning is not an afterthought imposed upon reality, but an intrinsic thread woven into its very fabric. If meaning exists before and beyond us, then the spiritual life is less about inventing meaning and more about learning to perceive and trust it.

As St. Augustine, reflecting on his journey toward God, expresses the inherent restlessness of the human heart when it seeks fulfillment outside of divine communion:

*"You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You." — St. Augustine's "Confessions," Bk 1*

The restless search for living meaning, then, is not a futile or lonely grasping at illusions but a sign that we are being drawn toward something real—something beyond ourselves. It is in this magnetic attraction that things may finally begin to truly make sense.

### **The Point**

All is just as it is -  
manifestations of One.  
And what we think we are  
is a thick lens, that condenses  
living consciousness  
to a small  
circle of light.

This limitation gives "identity"  
and "meaning", which  
we think we need.  
And a name.  
But the wrong name.

The small circle permits  
some contribution  
to our little people-place

## *Insights from Various Traditions*

Quotations from various traditions can help us with their perspectives on the search for meaning. The Jewish Talmud declares that we see meaning through the lens of our own awareness. Rumi the Sufi tells us that the search itself is part of the transformation. Laozi from Taoism says that the deepest truths cannot be confined to words. Jainism reminds us that meaning has many faces, and must be seen from many perspectives.

**"We do not see things as they are; we see things as we are."**

— *Talmud Berakhot 55b; Judaism – The Talmud*

These words suggest that meaning is not just an objective property of the world but something that arises from the relationship between the observer and the observed. Does this mean that there is no divinely-infused meaning unfolding in nature and the cosmos out there? Well, it's not "out there"! Our capacity to recognize meaning depends on the state of our heart and mind—a theme deeply relevant to contemplative spirituality. Furthermore many mystics see a unity of which we and the mountains and rivers are parts or aspects. In that view, nothing is "out there."

**"Don't seek water, seek thirst."**

— *Rumi, Masnavi; Sufism – Rumi*

Rumi's words suggest that the search for meaning is itself part of transformation. This echoes the Christian mystical idea that the deepest longing of the heart is not something to be possessed but something we are drawn into. St. Augustine spoke of the heart's restlessness until it finds God, and the Psalmist compared it to a deer thirsting for water. When this longing is surrendered to grace, it is no longer egoic craving but a movement of the Spirit within us—what St. Paul describes as the Spirit interceding for us with wordless groans

**"The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name."**

— *Tao Te Ching, Chapter 1; Taoism – Laozi (Lao Tzu)*

Since meaning is more than definitions and labels, the deepest reality cannot be fully captured in words. This Taoist insight resonates with the apophatic (or negative theology) tradition in Christianity, where the deepest truths are beyond language, encountered in silence and experience rather than rigid formulation.

a little-people place.  
But in my case,  
and all the ones I know  
the focus tastes confusion.

There is a place, a point  
beyond the lens, where  
the confusion may be seen.  
Sit there often, and long.  
Observe the confusion, and the lens.  
Watch the small circle of light.  
Like all else,  
they are beautiful.

Sit there often, and long.  
Enjoy a wide-open space  
and the breeze - you'll be the breeze.  
Sometimes, the One will shine  
bright with wider,  
wider light.

## Meaning Revealing Itself

If meaning is real, then how does it reveal itself to us? We can recognize at least four distinct ways in which meaning manifests:

### 1. Meaning as Representation.

This is the most basic form—how signs and symbols point beyond themselves. A word is not the thing itself but a vessel carrying significance. In a deeper sense, sacraments and sacred rituals embody meaning beyond words—they point to a divine reality that may include their physical form but reaches beyond it.

### 2. Meaning as Order and Coherence

Meaning is not only found in symbols but also in the interconnectedness of reality itself. Just as a musical chord is meaningful because of the relationship between its notes, so too does the cosmos unfold in patterns—fractals, Fibonacci sequences, the golden ratio in plant growth, crystal lattice structures, wave-particle duality in quantum mechanics, and the fine-tuned constants of the universe. Certain whole numbers— $\pi$  ( $\pi$ ),  $e$  (Euler's number), and others—appear in multiple, seemingly unrelated



Order moves unseen, shaping the world in silence

**“Truth is many-sided. What you see is only a part of it.”**

— Panchastikayasara; Jainism – Kundakunda, Jain Mystic, 1st Century CE

Jain philosophy teaches *anekantavada*, or the multiplicity of perspectives, which reminds us that meaning is never fully grasped from one vantage point alone. This complements the idea that meaning is relational and participatory, not something fixed and absolute or as seen from a single viewpoint.

**“We no longer dare to believe in beauty** and we make of it a mere appearance in order the more easily to dispose of it. Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance.”

— Hans Urs von Balthasar - *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume I*

Beauty is not an isolated aesthetic experience but something deeply linked to truth and goodness. To see beauty rightly is to recognize its power to transform and reveal something beyond itself. In his “Theological

fields, reinforcing the idea that reality is ordered, relational, and deeply coherent.

### 3. Meaning as Purpose and Direction

When we ask, *"What is the meaning of life?"* we are really asking, *"What is the ultimate purpose of life?"* The universe does not seem blindly indifferent but full of direction, unfolding, and calling. Life itself moves toward complexity, integration, and awareness—a process that some Christian mystics see as God's self-revelation through time.

Thomas Merton expresses this inner unfolding of meaning when he writes:

*"Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts."* — Merton, in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton, 1975*

Meaning, then, is not something merely external to be discovered but an inner transformation that requires openness and surrender. Palaeontologist and Christian mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin expands on this idea, affirming:

*"We are not just a momentary happening in the flux of the cosmos, but a particular focal point where the universe becomes conscious of itself."* — Teilhard de Chardin, in *The Phenomenon of Man*

This perspective shifts our understanding of purpose—it is not merely a quest for external significance but the recognition of a deeper reality already present within us, calling us into greater awareness. Meister Eckhart takes this further, emphasizing that our movement towards meaning is, at its core, a movement toward union with the divine:

*"Whoever lets go of himself for God's sake, truly finds himself in God."* — paraphrase of part of Sermon 13b, DW 1, p. 204

Here, purpose is not simply about direction or accomplishment but about the progressive relinquishing of the false self in order to fully receive and embody our true self in God. Finding meaning, then, is not just a mental exercise or project of the ego. It is intuited, lived, and embodied in the humble but wonderful unfolding of our being toward deeper unity with the Divine.

Aesthetics", the author makes a case for the vital importance of beauty in spiritual life

**"Beauty will save the world."**

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*; words spoken by Prince Myshkin

A simple yet profound assertion that points to the redemptive and revelatory power of beauty. This enigmatic phrase has been widely interpreted in Christian and theological thought. Dostoevsky suggests that beauty has a redemptive power—pointing to Christ, the ultimate embodiment of truth, goodness, and beauty. It reinforces the contemplative insight that encountering beauty is not a passive act but an invitation into deeper spiritual reality. For Dostoevsky, beauty is not trivial—it draws us beyond ourselves and toward what is true, good, and ultimately salvific.

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The way unfolds—not as an answer, but as a journey into light

#### 4. Meaning as Depth and Recognition

Finally, meaning is something we feel—in love, in beauty, perhaps in tragedy, in moments of deep peace. A sunset is not just an interplay of photons; it is a silent summons to awe, whispering of something vast and sacred beyond itself.

##### Recognition

the enlightened one raised  
a flower to the crowd  
was silent, and waited  
when somebody smiled

on seeing the truth  
true nature of all  
beyond form

the son of the most high  
broke bread for them  
then gave it, and waited  
when they recognised him

as the uncreated  
true nature of all  
beyond form

Alluded to in the first stanza of this poem, the Flower Sermon<sup>1</sup> of the Buddha used no words, just a raised lotus flower. His wise and intuitive follower Mahakasyapa smiled. In the third stanza, two downcast followers of the murdered Jesus were joined by a mysterious stranger travelling to the village of Emmaus; they invited the stranger to rest and take food with them, as it was almost evening. At the meal, they "recognised him."<sup>2</sup>

Meaning is not always explicitly stated but emerges through presence, symbol, and participation in divine reality. Such moments suggest that meaning is not merely intellectual but deeply experiential—often arriving not through analysis but through wonder, awe, and surrender. As the Trappist contemplative monk Thomas Merton observed:

*"Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time."*

The depth of meaning is encountered not through grasping but through presence—when we allow ourselves to be drawn into the sacred mystery woven into the world around us.

(1) <https://blog.buddhagroove.com/the-flower-sermon/>

(2) "Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight." – Luke 24:31. See also Luke 24:30, 35 . See also John 1:3, John 14:6



Beneath stillness, a deeper order waits to be seen

## The Spiritual Invitation of Meaning

If meaning is something we receive, then the spiritual task is not to define meaning in great theological detail but to cultivate the conditions for meaning to arise.

This means practicing attentiveness to where meaning unexpectedly emerges in daily life. It means trusting that even moments of apparent meaninglessness may be part of a greater unfolding. It also means recognizing that prayer, silence, and contemplation are not escapes from meaning but doorways into it.

### Replenish

if you could only rest a bit  
and see what you are doing here  
you wonder what you'd find -  
an air of purpose, why, perhaps  
a pattern that might make some sense;  
with all good will and sometimes pluck, and luck,  
as you wander through this vast and small expanse  
and wonder what you're doing here

has it all been done, all done before  
or will all happen by itself,  
or is all futile, waste and vain -  
are you a fool to hope to make a better place  
or find a place that's steeped in sense,  
though other paths you can perceive would only make  
a tougher kind of fool?

but why not rest - ah, there's a clue  
the mould, it grows on you,  
- the shedding only when you're still

so make some space, and make some peace  
and make some love, and make some smile,  
and rest awhile, for you are not alone  
and the host replenishes  
from an infinite stock

Instead of asking, *What is the meaning of life?* perhaps the more powerful question is: How can I live in a way that deepens my participa-

tion in the meaningful whole?

The contemplative path does not promise logical certainty but spiritual trust—trust that meaning is already present, that our task is to receive it with openness and faith. Eventually, this path bears fruit in terms of a different kind of certainty.

As St. Paul writes:

*"In Him all things hold together."* (Colossians 1:17)

If meaning is not separate from us, but rather woven into the fabric of reality, then every act of love, every moment of beauty, every breath of stillness may be revealing something eternal and real.

Our task is not to manufacture meaning, but to awaken. To awaken to the quiet truth that we have been swimming in it all along.

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In surrender, meaning is received, not grasped