

Widening Horizons: Issues on Life and Death from Existentialism to Buddhism

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Abstract

Prompted by the question, “What is the meaning of life?,” taken in the context of Western existentialist tradition, this paper offers a Buddhist perspective in an attempt to clarify what the question means when basic assumptions about life—that one lives one lifetime and then dies—are changed. From the many-lives theory of Buddhism, the question of “life’s meaning,” which existentialists, more often than not, consider as absurd, becomes not only unnecessary, but also quite meaningless. Reviewing the varying meanings and value of the term “nothingness” and “emptiness” in both existentialist and Buddhist thought, this paper shows that the initial negative associations to these terms may be transformed into something positive that gives a less absurd (or even defeatist) view of life. In the end, existentialist thought and Buddhism may even coincide, if concern for an *authentic* living of life is given priority over the question of its meaning.

Keywords: Existentialism, Buddhism, nothingness, emptiness, meaning of life

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開拓生死論述的視界： 從存在主義到佛教

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摘要

本文首先梳理出西方存在主義傳統如何回答「人生的意義是甚麼」之問題，接着從佛教的觀點，扭轉「人只能活一次」的假設，從而釐清這個問題的涵義。從佛教的「多生多世」主張，存在主義者大概會推演出這樣的結論：追問人生的意義，本身就是荒謬的，不但多此一舉，而且毫無意義。本文透過檢視存在主義與佛教思想中「無」與「空」等語辭的各種含義，指出這些原初帶有負面義蘊的字眼，其實都可以轉化成正面的意義，從而紓解視生命是不可理喻（或是注定失敗）的人生觀的癥結。假如我們不光着眼於「人生的意義為何」這個老問題，轉而關注「怎樣活出真實的人生」，到最後，存在主義與佛教思想的會通，其實是不無可能的。

關鍵詞：存在主義、佛教、無、空、生命意義