

# Philosophical Practice in Humanitarian Crises: Existential Ruptures and the “Way of Well-Being” Model

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**Abstract:** This study considers how philosophical practice can address humanitarian crises such as forced displacement and natural disasters, beyond logistical and psychological interventions. Drawing on fieldwork with 137 survivors of the 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquakes in Türkiye, it examines the existential ruptures caused by the loss of home, community, and bodily orientation. Guided by Heidegger’s concept of *Geworfenheit*, Spinoza’s *conatus* and *affectus*, and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, the research applies the “Way of Well-Being,” a five-stage model of Awareness, Analysis, Unity and Integrity, Choice, and Sustainability. Findings indicate that philosophical group sessions foster emotional expression, conceptual clarity, bodily reintegration, and renewed agency. Rather than offering abstract consolation, philosophy here becomes an embodied, dialogical, and relational framework for meaning reconstruction. Addressing ontological dislocation emerges as essential for sustainable post-crisis recovery. The study positions philosophy not as a luxury but as an ethical necessity in humanitarian response, enabling survivors to transform rupture into a space of reorientation and re-creation.

**Key-words:** humanitarian crises; existential ruptures; embodied; *conatus&affectus*; *geworfenheit*; philosophical counseling; well-being;

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## **Introduction**

The 21st century has been shaped by large-scale crises such as forced migration, war, and natural disasters. While these events are often addressed through political, emergency response, or psychological perspectives, they contradict the very foundations of human existence: identity, belonging, and meaning. Disasters reveal human fragility not only physically but also ethically and ontologically. The sudden loss of home or community reveals our dependence on the structures that give coherence to life. This article focuses on two humanitarian crises in Türkiye: the influx of Syrian refugees since 2011 and the earthquakes that struck Kahramanmaraş in 2023. These layered events demonstrate how disasters disrupt not only external circumstances but also the internal architecture of experience: time, space, and self. Drawing on three philosophical frameworks, the article interprets these ruptures as follows: Heidegger's concepts of *Dasein* and *Geworfenheit*, Spinoza's ideas of *affectus* and *conatus*, and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of *bodily perception*.

In disasters, the normal flow of life is halted; identity dissolves. Survivors often find themselves disconnected from the past, suspended in time, unable to envision a future. The study suggests that philosophy can offer a way out of this disorientation. Fieldwork with earthquake survivors in 2024 applied "The Way of Wellbeing," a five-stage philosophical method, to support recovery. Rather than offering clinical solutions, this model creates a space for reflection, reinterpretation, and conceptual anchoring to reconstruct existence and meaning.

The central claim is that lived and relational philosophy can respond to crisis not with abstraction but with presence. When meaning collapses, philosophical engagement helps rebuild the fragile structures between self and world. This reframes philosophy not just as an intellectual pursuit but also as an ethical responsibility.

## **Forced Displacement and Ontological Disruption in Humanitarian Contexts**

In recent decades, Turkey has become both a frontline recipient and a central transit hub in global humanitarian crises, particularly forced migration and natural disasters. As of 2024, the country continues to

grapple with two overlapping catastrophes: the long-standing Syrian refugee crisis and the devastating 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquakes (AFAD, 2023; UNHCR, 2024).

The refugee crisis began with Syria's civil war in 2011. Over a decade later, Turkey remains the largest host country for refugees, with about 3.2 million Syrians under temporary protection. Many are concentrated in southeastern provinces already facing economic challenges including Hatay, Gaziantep, Kilis, and Şanlıurfa, straining infrastructure and social services.

While initial responses focused on emergency needs, long-term challenges have emerged around integration, identity, and belonging. Refugees, severed from place and history, often inhabit ambiguous legal and social spaces. Their displacement is not just physical but existential, disrupting their being-in-the-world. As Heidegger (1962) emphasizes, to dwell is to belong meaningfully. For many refugees, dwelling remains suspended. This fragile landscape was further ruptured by the twin earthquakes of February 6, 2023, which struck 11 provinces including regions with dense refugee populations. Over 50,000 lives were lost, and more than 1.5 million were displaced or rendered homeless (AFAD, 2023). While humanitarian aid was quickly mobilized, systemic challenges in coordination and infrastructure revealed structural weaknesses.

Survivors continue to face uncertainty in temporary shelters, experiencing exhaustion, disorientation, and loss. The destruction was not merely material but ontological: the collapse of homes also meant the collapse of memory, routine, and sensory familiarity. As Merleau-Ponty (2012) notes, our bodily orientation is shaped through environment. When that is destroyed, the self also becomes dislocated.

Importantly, many refugees who had already fled war were now doubly displaced—as disaster survivors. The compounding effect of war and natural disaster deepened emotional and existential fatigue. Field observations report symptoms such as anxiety, numbness, and existential suspension (WHO, 2023).

These crises raise a critical question: can traditional humanitarian responses meet the depth of such rupture? Food, shelter, and medical support are essential, but insufficient to address ontological dislocation the loss of coherence, identity, and meaning.

Philosophical practice offers a complementary framework. As Hadot (1995) suggests, crises call for spiritual exercises practices that help individuals reflect on existence and reorient themselves within it. This requires moving beyond survival to reengagement with meaning and selfhood. In sum, the refugee and earthquake crises in Turkey illustrate the limits of technical solutions and the necessity for existential care. These overlapping events exemplify what it means for the ground beneath one's feet literally and figuratively to collapse. The following section deepens this philosophical interpretation of rupture.

### **Philosophical Interpretation of Existential Rupture**

Crises such as forced migration and natural disasters lead not only to logistical disruptions but also to existential ruptures. These events shatter the network of relationships through which individuals make sense of themselves and their world. This rupture threatens identity, memory, and hope, severing the bond of being in the world and leading to ontological alienation.

"Discontinuity" is used here in a phenomenological sense: a radical rupture in temporality, spatiality, and relationally. Merleau-Ponty (2012) emphasizes that perception is embodied and situated. When familiar spaces are destroyed, gestures and rhythms disappear, the body loses its orientation, and the world loses its meaning. Survivors often describe this as living in a void where the past is inaccessible, the present unbearable, and the future unimaginable.

This rupture is not merely emotional but ontological. Heidegger (1962) defines place not as geography, but as the ground of dwelling, the state of being at home in the world. When this foundation collapses, the coherence of the self also collapses. Refugees and disaster survivors often live in this state of placelessness, marked by a sense of temporal distortion and unreality. Being thrown into a world not of one's choosing becomes a lived reality. Furthermore, when relational matrices are broken, identity becomes destabilized. As Spinoza (1994) argued, the human mind is shaped by how we are affected by others. When these relationships are lost through death, exile, or disconnection, individuals experience not only loneliness but also the fragmentation of their self.

Emotional states such as fear, shame, or numbness emerge not as personal flaws but as symptoms of relational disconnection. Spatial disorientation deepens this disconnection. Ordinary sensory cues—sounds, smells, faces—form the background of belonging. When these are erased, individuals lose their bodily connection. This reflects what Merleau-Ponty (2012) calls the loss of bodily intentionality: the body's ability to project itself meaningfully into space.

At this point, philosophical practice becomes crucial. It treats repetitions not as pathology, but as a space for reorientation. Through reflection, naming, and dialogue, individuals can begin to establish a relationship with their experiences and with others.

Transformation requires re-engaging with the "flesh of the world"—the body in space, rhythm, and relationship (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Well-being is not merely cognitive, but existential. Movements such as walking, breathing, or drawing can reconnect the body. Acts of witnessing, listening, and choosing ground the self relationally. Healing becomes not a return to what has been lost, but a reconstruction of being. Crises require not only logistical interventions or psychological responses; they also raise urgent collective ethical questions: Should refugees and disaster survivors be treated as problems to be managed, or as ethical interlocutors who call us to responsibility?

As a philosopher with over fifteen years of direct field experience, I argue that philosophy has a moral obligation to respond to such crises. As Hadot (1995) emphasizes, philosophy must be rooted in life itself; it must approach suffering not as an abstract concept but as a concrete, situated phenomenon.

Fulfilling this responsibility does not mean retreating into theoretical abstraction or observing from a safe intellectual distance. Rather, it requires actively engaging with the raw essence of life. Philosophers must help individuals reconnect with the world, with others, and with the inner movements of their own becoming.

In this context, philosophical practice requires a triple action: witnessing loss with ethical presence, engaging in reflective meaning-making, and supporting the body's re-embedding in space. This is not merely discourse; it is embodied care that revitalizes language, restores orientation, and fosters shared understanding.

## **From Rupture to Reintegration: The Role of Philosophical Practice**

Crises go beyond disrupting daily routines and question the fundamental structures of existence and meaning. In these moments, familiar foundations such as identity, continuity, and purpose are shattered, plunging individuals into radical uncertainty.

While deeply destabilizing, existential rupture can also serve as a threshold. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty (2012), a crisis reveals what is "yet to be," a future not yet known but made possible through bodily and relational interaction. Therefore, the purpose of philosophical practice is not merely to name loss but to accompany individuals in a process of reorientation and transformation.

Philosophical change is not limited to abstract insight. It involves revitalizing space, restructuring relationships, and reactivating ethical agency. The task is not psychological recovery per se, but ontological reintegration: recovering one's capacity to live, choose, and act meaningfully even in the face of suffering. The three philosophical frameworks guiding this study, Heidegger, Spinoza, and Merleau-Ponty, illuminate different dimensions of this process.

Human crises often reveal the structures we habitually inhabit. Drawing on Heidegger's (1962) existential framework, when Dasein is "thrown" (*Geworfenheit*) into unfamiliar circumstances, the collapse of meaning can open the door to original inquiry.

The fragility experienced during humanitarian crises, viewed within this framework, reflects the existential state in which individuals find themselves immersed in a world they did not choose, a world stripped of their habitual reference points and forced to confront uncertainty and, often, challenges. This rupture, while disorienting, acts as a threshold between dissolution and re-creation, revealing the hidden structures of existence. In this suspended space, Dasein-self encounters a profound openness. Freed from previous certainties, Dasein is allowed to question fundamental assumptions and redefine what it means to exist. This existential freedom, while fraught with anxiety, also carries the potential for ethical transformation and authentic becoming.

Philosophical counseling plays a vital role here; Not as an answer provider, but as a companion in the process of inquiry. It creates a dialogic space where individuals can deeply engage with their experiences, emotions, and fears. Through this interaction, the self not only sustains existence but also regains its agency by actively engaging with it.

Spinoza's concept of *conatus* (the innate striving to persist in being) illuminates the resilience at the heart of human existence. When acknowledged and understood through reason, emotional turmoil becomes a source of insight and empowerment rather than paralysis. Rather than opposing emotion, reason directs it toward meaningful action and ethical choice. Group philosophical dialogue further strengthens this dynamic, enabling participants to move from isolated suffering to share understanding. By collectively expressing and reflecting on emotions, individuals develop both personal insight and social support. This interplay of self-awareness and social connection forms the foundation for sustainable well-being.

Merleau-Ponty's (2012) emphasis on *bodily perception* reveals that existential disengagement is not merely a mental disturbance but also a disruption of bodily orientation. A crisis disrupts the temporal and spatial intentionality through which the body maintains its prereflective interaction with the world. The body no longer moves, gestures, or pays attention to the familiar rhythms it once experienced in space and time. This dislocation is not merely a loss of coordination but a suspension of the lived ground of existence. Recovery, therefore, stems not only from cognitive restructuring but also from a renewed bodily orientation. Through the repetition of familiar gestures, the reactivation of sensory rhythms, and the reintegration of movement, the body reconstitutes its relational fabric with the world. In this process, the subject regains not only a sense of external coherence but also an internal existential rhythm. Ultimately, emergence from crisis is made possible through the re-functioning of the bodily being. The renewal of the body's capacity to inhabit space and time creates the condition within which coherence and meaning can be re-established. The world becomes livable again precisely to the extent that bodily orientation is rebuilt.

Philosophical transformation is not just a personal process, but also a relational process. Heidegger's *Mitsein* (being-with), Spinoza's affective reciprocity, and Merleau-Ponty's bodily reciprocity point to the social

fabric of wellbeing. Identity is reconstituted not simply individually, but through being seen, heard, and engaged in dialogue. This enables shared meaning, mutual attention, and conceptual co-production. In these microcosms, the act of reflection becomes a form of solidarity. Philosophical practice, therefore, serves a dual function: it brings inner clarity and provides ethical companionship.

Philosophizing in crisis is not surrendering to rupture, but confronting it with awareness and care. This confrontation enables transformation. This transformation is not a return to a lost past, but a re-creation of what is possible. It integrates the rupture without erasing it. It honors the pain without denying it. The next section will reveal how this framework is implemented through structured group sessions.

### **Philosophical Group Practice in Crisis Contexts**

Philosophical group sessions are structured primarily around the Socratic dialogue method. This approach blends Hadot's (1995) view of philosophy as "a way of life," Lahav's (2001) "worldview"-based philosophical counseling model, Cohen's (2003) "logical contradictions"-focused questioning method, Marinoff's (2001) PEACE model, and Frankl's (2006) logotherapy approach. Group sessions not only provide a space for intellectual interaction but also a multidimensional platform for participation through bodily awareness, drawing, movement, and conceptual maps. This structured process consists of five key stages, making philosophical group sessions a fundamental, rather than peripheral, form of existential being. These sessions directly address not only the psychological effects of ruptures but also the collapse of an individual's world of meaning, identity, and sense of vital continuity. Dialogical inquiry, bodily awareness exercises, and shared reflection are the three core components of these sessions. In this context, philosophical group work facilitates the reconstruction of existence by linking thinking with relationally and wellbeing with the conceptual.

Philosophical practice positions participants not as passive recipients but as intellectual actors with the potential to express and reconstruct their own worldviews (Lahav & Tillmanns, 1995). In the group setting, this capacity for self-reflection becomes collective; a fabric of philosophical meaning is woven through shared inquiry and mutual



resonance. One of the first realizations observed in fieldwork conducted with 137 earthquake survivors in 2024 was: "So I am not alone." This statement marks the transition from individual solitude to intersubjectivity. When considered within the context of Heidegger's (1993) concept of "being-with" (*Mitsein*), group work renders visible co-existence, a fundamental characteristic of *Dasein*. In this context, the group becomes a space of existence where thought, interest, and meaning are temporarily but meaningfully reconstructed.

One of the fundamental processes in sessions is the transformation of emotional expression into conceptual thought. While therapeutic models generally rely on catharsis (emotional release), philosophical practice prioritizes meaning-making. With an understanding grounded in Spinoza's (1994) concepts of *affectus* and *conatus*, emotions are not merely felt; they are conceptually examined for their causes and conditions. For example, the statement of a participant who says, "I'm constantly afraid," becomes not a symptom but an object of inquiry: "What is the nature of this fear?", "What does this fear say about your worldview?" Such questions allow passive affect to transform into active intellectual engagement. Another participant recognized the pain of being unable to protect her child beneath the intense anger she felt throughout the sessions. Such reframing does not suppress emotions; it clarifies them and opens up a space for choice. These transformations are indicative not only of the therapeutic effect of philosophical practice, but of the philosophical transformation itself.

Philosophical group work involves not only dialogue but also body-based phenomenological practices. Exercises such as sensory mapping, symbolic drawing, and grounding, inspired by Merleau-Ponty's (2012) body phenomenology, help participants regain their bodily awareness. One female participant's statement, "I felt like I was touching the ground for the first time in weeks," emphasizes the body-mind relationship as a restorative awareness. This statement demonstrates how ruptures affect the body and how bodily reflection offers a space for repair. Sessions involve not only sharing among participants but also mutual response generation, questioning, metaphor development, and the articulation of resonances. Inspired by the Socratic tradition, this dialogue process creates a space where meaning is not imposed from above but rather co-created. For example, concepts like "home," "belonging," or "hope" are

derived not from a theoretical framework but from the participants' life stories. The metaphor of a "tree in a storm," offered by other participants to a participant who expressed feeling "uprooted," epitomizes this process. These metaphors become tools for creating a shared conceptual vocabulary.

Philosophical group sessions are positioned not only as psychological support mechanisms but also as an ethical response to human fragility. In times of crisis, people need not only resources but also recognition and spaces where their experiences are not pathologies and their questions are not silenced. Silences become as vital as a look or a touch. Thus, the group becomes a space "lived" together, creating a space of existence where rupture is not erased but reshaped through dialogue.

In line with Hadot's (1995) understanding of philosophy as a way of life, philosophy manifests itself in group sessions as a form of listening, attention, and witnessing. This process involves remaining patient in the face of uncertainty, not reducing suffering to a mere diagnosis, and creating common ground for collaboratively constructing meaning. Sessions serve not only a therapeutic but also an ontological function. Participants have the opportunity to re-establish their identities, re-experience time, and re-enter space. Expressions such as "I remembered myself," "I want to paint again," or "Perhaps I can sprout from somewhere else" are indicators of this existential transformation. This transition represents a continuum from fragmentation to subjectification, from silence to language, from tolerance to agency.

Ultimately, philosophical group sessions offer an opportunity for profound existential repair through collective inquiry and bodily reflection. They open up space for participants not only to heal but also to philosophize. These sessions are an ethical and conceptual journey that restores the dignity of thought in the effort to make sense of suffering.

The next section presents the Way of Wellbeing, the structured model through which this process is implemented.

### **The "Way of Wellbeing": A Five-Stage Model for Post-Crisis Reintegration**

Philosophical practice in humanitarian crises should not only be reflective but also methodologically structured and accessible.

Drawing on fieldwork with 137 earthquake survivors in Southeastern Türkiye, the Way of Wellbeing model was developed to guide participants from fragmentation to existential reintegration. This five-stage framework—Awareness, Analysis, Unity and Integrity, Choice, and Sustainability—offers a practical method grounded in lived experience and philosophical insight. The sessions took place over four weeks in temporary shelters and community spaces in 2024. Despite limited resources, participants demonstrated a strong openness to philosophical dialogue. Their reflections demonstrate that deep conceptual engagement is not unique to academia; when grounded in experience, it is universal to humanity.

*Stage 1: Awareness—Naming the Inner Landscape*

This opening stage cultivates emotional safety and embodied presence. Inspired by Merleau-Ponty's (2012) view of perception, exercises such as emotion mapping, breath awareness, and prompts like "If my body could speak..." allow participants to observe their internal states without judgment.

Vulnerability often leads to numbness or detachment. Naming what is felt sadness, fear, anger, or emptiness marks the first return to self. As participants vocalize, "I didn't know I felt this way" or "For the first time, I can put my feelings into words," they move from opacity to presence.

*Stage 2: Analysis - Situating the Self in Time and Relationship*

The second phase explores temporal and relational depth. Drawing on Spinoza's (1994) concept of *affect* (*affectus*), participants are encouraged to connect their current feelings to previous experiences, such as childhood loss or social exclusion. Crisis is rarely isolated; it rekindles old wounds. By connecting current pain to a broader life trajectory, participants begin to articulate layered meanings. "I didn't just lose my home, I lost my childhood," one said. Another shared, "My fear began long before the earthquake." These insights reframed the crisis not as a singular event but as part of a larger existential narrative.

*Stage 3: Unity and Integrity*

*– Embracing Dualities, Reconnecting with Life*

This phase invites participants to explore the complexity of how opposing emotions coexist. Through symbolic exercises like drawing polarities or walking meditation, they reflect on the simultaneity of fear and hope, grief and love. This is informed by Stoic and phenomenological

traditions that emphasize balance and interdependence. Participants also reconnect with nature and sensory grounding. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body as the common fabric of life guided this phase. "I've lost my roots, but maybe I can sprout from somewhere else," one participant mused. The ability to accommodate paradox opens up the possibility of becoming whole again.

#### *Stage 4: Choice – Reclaiming Agency and Exercising Will*

The fourth stage focuses on volition and ethical action. Inspired by Heidegger's (1962) concept of authenticity and Spinoza's concept of conatus, participants explore their capacity to choose even within limitations. They consider questions such as, "What is one small action that reflects the person I want to be?" or "How can I live consciously despite uncertainty?" These are not solutions, but philosophical openings to responsibility and authorship. Many described a change as follows: "I can't change everything, but I can choose how I respond." "I remembered myself." These are not denials of rupture, but signs of a reawakening of agency in response to it.

#### *Stage 5: Sustainability – Integrating Philosophy into Daily Life*

The final stage emphasizes continuity. Insights must be embodied beyond the session, through daily rituals, relational care, or creative practice. Participants consider how they can maintain philosophical well-being: morning walks, writing, planting trees, or speaking consciously. This reflects Hadot's (1995) view of philosophy as a *bios*, a lived commitment to wisdom and attentiveness. Merleau-Ponty's idea of orientation is also central here: the body, once fragmented, now moves with intention again. Participants shared: "I will start painting again," "I have friends they are still alive and I'll see them more often," These are not trivial gestures. They are enactments of coherence, of a return to being.

Across the five stages, participants reported increased emotional expression, enhanced conceptual and temporal clarity, a renewed connection to bodily presence, a strengthened sense of agency, and revitalized relational engagement. Rather than offering solutions, the model encouraged a philosophical reconstruction of life after rupture. Wellbeing became a creative and ethical act an existential reassembly that honors pain without being trapped by it.

In the next and final section evaluates the implications of this model and suggest ways to integrate it more broadly into post-crisis practice.

## **Philosophy as Ethical Response in Humanitarian Contexts**

This study demonstrates that philosophical practice, when grounded in lived experience and guided by existential insight, offers a powerful resource for navigating human crises. The Way of Well-Being model, developed with 137 earthquake survivors following the 2023 disaster, offers a structured, accessible, and ethically sensitive approach to post-crisis recovery. Such crises are not merely logistical disruptions. They are ontological ruptures, disruptions that shake identity, disorient time, and destroy meaning. As Heidegger's *Geworfenheit* demonstrates, individuals are thrown into unfamiliar circumstances that destroy their existential foundations. Spinoza's *conatus* emphasizes the inner struggle to survive under such conditions, while Merleau-Ponty reminds us that healing must occur through bodily and relational re-engagement. The five-stage model, Awareness, Analysis, Unity and Integrity, Choice, and Sustainability, offered participants a path from fragmentation to reconstruction. The process emphasized emotional clarity, conceptual understanding, bodily presence, and ethical agency. It did not predict recovery, but rather facilitated its emergence through shared thought and symbolic action.

Participant reflections bear witness to this effect. Phrases such as "I remembered myself," "I want to paint again," or "I can sprout from somewhere else" are more than expressions of relief; they are existential declarations. They demonstrate regained agency, imagination, and the reactivation of *conatus*. In this context, philosophy is not a luxury but a lifeline; it is a framework for reclaiming one's place in the world after rupture. This fieldwork was conducted within the constraints of post-disaster conditions, without institutional funding. While participation was intensive, it lacked the capacity for longitudinal follow-up or systematic evaluation. Therefore, the findings must be understood qualitatively and phenomenological, offering insights into lived meaning rather than statistical generalization.

Future research must aim to build on this pilot study. Mixed-method studies, longitudinal evaluations, and collaboration with universities or public health institutions can strengthen the replicability and integration of the model.

Cultural adaptation and ethical scrutiny will also be vital for sustainable application across diverse contexts. Nevertheless, the philosophical implications are clear. In a world marked by fragmentation, forced displacement, and ecological precariousness, there is a growing need for approaches that address not only material or psychological needs but also the existential conditions of human life: identity, belonging, meaning, and action. Philosophy provides a space for this: a space to question, to listen, and to begin anew.

This work challenges us to rethink what we mean by "help." Humanitarian support cannot be limited to food, shelter, or infrastructure. The rebuilding of life also requires the rebuilding of sense. To respond solely with logistics is to ignore the existential wound. Philosophy, then, becomes a form of care, not an academic abstraction, but a public responsibility. It is concerned not only with what happened but also with who we become in the aftermath. It invites us to confront the rupture not with silence or avoidance, but with attention, dialogue, and courage.

To philosophize after a collapse is to walk among the ruins. It is not merely to explain what has happened, but to seek what might take root in the cracks. As Hadot (1995) reminds us, the task of thought is not to flee but to remain: to stand where meaning falters and to attend, with care, to what still breathes. In such a life, philosophy becomes a companion, not one that offers distant consolation, but a voice that dares to ask: *How shall we live now?* To pose this question is to refuse despair the final word and to recognize that every fracture can also be a beginning. It is to read the rubble not only as a break but as a turning point. It means to hear the call that the world might yet be rebuilt. To respond to this call with responsibility, courage, care, and steadfast continuity is the possibility of a fully human life realized.

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