The Strings to the Banjo of Life

What is the meaning of life? What is the reason and intention of everything in life? After all the love and companionship of cherished friends, the pain and struggle of trials, the learning and knowledge of schooling, what is the purpose to life? This question has plagued and troubled the human race since the beginning of its existence. Thousands of people have tried to answer this complicated question. Most of these people become only more confused and disappointed in their search for an answer. Some people argue that there is no answer to this question. They argue this because rarely does one person produce a solid answer that is accepted by the masses of society. Other people argue that there is an answer, but that it is unattainable. Although people say these things, others believe that there is an answer and that it just has not been attained yet by a person. These people believe that the well-educated and academic individuals will produce the closest and best answer. These scholarly men and women have also struggled with the meaning of life for millennia and few of them have come close to a reasonable solution. One scholarly man has produced the most reasonable answer that stands out above the rest. This Chinese man of letters, Shi Tiesheng, produced a theory to the meaning of life that is acceptable by the masses. This man’s theory is implied in a short story that is one of his most famous works. In this short story, “Life is Like a Banjo String,” Shi Tiesheng expresses his thoughts on life and his conclusion that the meaning of life is composed of and can be found in the actions taken in life, the energy spent on those actions, and by living life to its fullest.

Shi Tiesheng’s “Life is Like a Banjo String” expresses that the first component of the meaning of life can be found in the actions a person makes in his or her lifetime. It is the actions in a lifetime that are important, not the material goods in a person's life which matter. This idea is conveyed both at the beginning of the story and at the end of the story with the main characters. “It matters little whence they came, or where they are going, it matters naught who they are (Shi Tiesheng, 205).” This shows that the main characters are unimportant in who they actually are in the story. The main characters could be anybody and it really would not change the story. This is also why the old man and young lad are not given names in the story. It is their actions in the story that are important and which the readers will remember. This is the same in life. A person is not remembered for who he or she is or was. That person is remembered for his or her actions in that lifetime. This works for people of all classes from kings and presidents to peasants and farmers. None of them would be remembered for themselves. They are remembered for the actions they took like passing a law or devoting their life to helping others. “The three clay statues on the altar had long ago lost their worldly trappings and reverted to the yellow earth out of
which they had first taken shape, so that one could not even tell whether they had once been Buddhist or Taoist figures (Shi Tiesheng, 184).” As this quote shows, physical things or people are not remembered, but what they did are remembered. The kind of statues is not remembered, but the fact that they helped people with prayers is remembered. The actions in a person’s life are the things that are important. As the old blind man in the story says, “Our lives are right here on these banjo strings (Shi Tiesheng, 204).” Again, this quote shows that one’s life is right there in the actions he takes in his life. Those are the things that will be cherished and not forgotten. A name after all is still but a name. These are the reasons why “Life is Like a Banjo String” shows that the actions are one part of achieving the meaning of life.

Shi Tiesheng’s “Life is Like a Banjo String” also expresses his thought that the second component to the meaning of life can be found in the energy one puts into the action’s in his or her life. The meaning of life can be found in the actions taken, but more importantly in the energy that one puts into those actions. A person must put his heart and soul into the things and actions that person loves in life. This must be done in order to maximize the meaning of life from every action. People can do a good deed or do what they love, but that does not mean they will attain or come close to achieving the meaning of life. If a person does something without putting his or her heart and soul into an act, the act really does not mean anything and it becomes meaningless. “He must put his whole heart and soul into every note, or the broken strings would mean nothing (Shi Tiesheng, 178).” This shows that the act of breaking the strings must be done fully or it will mean nothing. An act must be done fully or not at all. Do or do not, there is no try. An act must be significant and, most importantly, justified by the emotions in which the act was acted out and accomplished. An act can be performed in malice or in a lie; however, this act would be meaningless because it was not done with the person’s whole heart and soul. When looked at in this light, Shi Tiesheng also reveals that only positive actions done with the whole heart and soul are meaningful. This reveals that one need not be concerned with negative influences or acts at all because they are meaningless. One should only be concerned with performing positive acts and putting ones whole heart and soul into these acts. A person must do as the old man says, “Play your banjo. Play it, string after string, with your whole heart and soul (Shi Tiesheng, 204).” All these reasons prove that the meaning of life is also found in the energy that one puts into the important actions in life.

Lastly, “Life is Like a Banjo String” by Shi Tiesheng shows that he believes the final component to the meaning of life can be found by living life to its fullest. Many people believe that life is very short when compared to eternity. This causes these people to feel that life is very precious and should be cherished for all its worth. Shi Tiesheng is one of the many people that believe these things. He shows this in his story. The old man lives life to its fullest each and every day. He does this by traveling around
the country doing what he loves by playing the banjo and “bringing gaiety and excitement into the lives of these isolated hill folks (Shi Tiesheng, 180).” One way to live life to its fullest is by doing what you love like the old man. One person once said, “Decide what you want to do in life that makes you happy. Then, find someone stupid enough to pay you for doing what you love.” A person must decide what it is that he or she wants to do in life to be happy. He or she must then set upon a path to fulfill that goal and reach the end of that journey. Only then will that person be truly happy and able to live life to its fullest. Also, only then can the strings of life be broken to fulfill the meaning of life. “Those strings have to be broken, one by one, while you’re actually playing the banjo (Shi Tiesheng).” This quote showed that the old man needed to be doing what he loved, playing the banjo, in order to fulfill the meaning of life. When one does what one loves in life, that person will not need to worry about every being unhappy. That person is doing what he or she loves, and he or she needs only to remember that when feeling down. Why be sad when a person is doing what that person loves to do in life? This is true for the old man in the story. “This was the only thing that could make him forget all his troubles, all his unhappiness. It was a life’s worth of hopes and dreams (Shi Tiesheng, 188).” This is where the phrase “to seize the moment,” or carpe diem, is applied. These are why Shi Tiesheng shows in “Like is Like a Banjo String” that by living life to its fullest the last component to the meaning of life will be fulfilled.

The actions taken in life, the energy spent on those actions, and by living life to its fullest are the key components to the meaning of life that Shi Tiesheng expresses in his short story “Life is Like a Banjo String.” These three components are expressed by Shi Tiesheng in this short story. There is still one question however, how does one achieve these components to attain the meaning of life? Shi Tiesheng also gives a hint to this question and to a method of achieving these three components in his story. A person can think of the banjo in the story as the thing the old man loves in life and as the method to achieving the meaning of life. When one thinks this way, one must only do what the old man tells the young lad. He says, “Hold the banjo in your hand (Shi Tiesheng, 173).” By this, he means that one must hold tightly to that which one loves and enjoy its use in life. After doing this one may be able to grasp the meaning of life. One must work towards the goal of being happy in life. This is not achieved with material goods, but with doing what one loves. The last and most important hint that Shi Tiesheng gives to the readers is to “Remember, life is like a banjo string. It must be taut before you can play it well. And when you have played it well, that is all that matters (Shi Tiesheng, 205).”