

Paradoxes of suffering

Julian Brotherton discusses how suffering affects us

Other people's suffering appeals, irresistibly, to many television viewers and readers. Misery sells. But our own pain, despair and heartbreak is another matter. We struggle constantly to evade it or distract ourselves.

No wonder that the almost obsessive quest for happiness has become a cult industry, awash with self-help books and courses. From womb to deathbed, in addition to the grosser manifestations of adversity, we are all enmeshed half-consciously in a pervasive, low-level chronic unease, a nameless existential anxiety. No feast without its end in sight, no loving without parting, no freedom without risk. A shadow stalks us even during intervals of bliss.

Coming to terms with this involves something deeper than stoicism or an effort to maximise pleasure and minimise pain. Since the dawn of time, humanity has sought for meaning and consolation in our tribulations, but with rather inadequate and futile results. The eastern doctrine of 'karma' attributes sufferings to behaviours in past incarnations; but this provides little comfort for victims.

However, we do meet some valiant souls who assure us that even desperately acute and irreversible afflictions in their lives have, paradoxically, turned out to be stepping stones to personal awakening or a new life.

My own experience is the reverse. For me, every step towards wisdom and inner strength has invariably followed from love, friendship, delight, pure luck or grace, and never from painful experience, which is simply pain to me. Am I morally or spiritually defective? Am I just a boorish and superficial person?

Profound thinkers though the ages have described suffering as the finest tool for our personal evolution. Perhaps this is only for chosen individuals. Even Jesus despaired. For hundreds of years Christianity has performed the most excruciating mental contortions to show that sufferings is for our own good.

I once heard an eminent religious man declare that evil is administered by a loving God, even in cancer. What are we to make of that?

I grew up with the precept that ends cannot justify means. Perhaps this is a mistake. We recall the classic scene, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, where Ivan Karamazov evokes truly atrocious details of a child living in agony. Ivan proclaims that even if such suffering for one child were the sole means of preserving everything good in the universe, it still wouldn't be worth the price. Let the universe cease!

Much suffering falls upon the innocent, including small babies, whose spiritual paths are unlikely to be much enhanced. What of the entirely pointless suffering of wild animals? Few live out a full life, dying of painful diseases, parasites, accidents, cold or starvation, or being eaten alive.

George Fox simply noted the 'Ocean of Darkness' and, like Gandhi, very wisely chose direct action instead of unconvincing flights of metaphysics.

A fundamental concern of Buddhism, in my understanding of it, is suffering. It forms a central focus of the religion, its practice and its philosophy. One is encouraged to explore what suffering is, the various forms it comes in and their root causes. How can a human being escape from suffering or eliminate it?

Buddhism incorporates meditations and psychological exercises for this purpose and in order to lead a fuller life. Some people spend years, and even lifetimes, practising these techniques: but, I believe, it is hard to know whether Buddhists achieve release from suffering any more successfully than others do. Most of us, I suspect, just keep our spiritual fingers crossed.

Back to George Fox, I think, and more loving service towards our fellow sufferers!

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