

The Spiritual Value of Suffering

By Donna M. L. Brown

Thousands of years ago the Buddha presented the first of his Four Noble Truths and said, “all life is suffering.” Today, as we look at the world around us we can see that the very fabric of life is riddled with distress and torment. Suffering is so indiscriminate and widespread that it leaves no nation, no race, or person of any station or age untouched. No matter who we are or how much we have accomplished, how much beauty, prestige, affluence or power we might have accumulated, it seems that there is no escape from anxiety, sickness and loss, or one of the many other forms of misfortune and suffering. Many of us tend to feel victimized and cheated by the difficulties that we face in our lives and might even come to view the pain and suffering that we experience as something intentionally inflicted upon us by a cruel and conspiratorial fate.

Since many of us can neither understand nor cope with the depth of the problems that confront us, we are left feeling depressed and fearful, or resentful and angry, and can do little more than bemoan or even rage against what seems to us a most hopeless state. Our refusal to recognize that suffering is a fact of life and our inability to discover some deeper meaning in our suffering only act to enhance and further the seemingly endless cycle of suffering.

In view of the fact that human suffering is a universal phenomenon that we can ultimately neither deny nor avoid, it is in our best interests to come to some understanding of why we suffer and how we might eventually move beyond suffering. This means that we will need to search below the surface to the deeper, underlying causes of suffering. We will also need to look at some of the emotional and mental attitudes that contribute to suffering and, most importantly, to the spiritual value of suffering - at how suffering can be used to open our hearts and minds to greater awareness or consciousness. In understanding the inherent nature and purposes of suffering we will not only come to see it as the impetus toward growth and betterment, we will also learn to detach and eventually free ourselves from suffering. For as the Buddha’s Second Noble Truth tells us, all the suffering in the world is caused by ignorance, desire and attachment.

In the Ageless Wisdom tradition, particularly in the writing of the Tibetan Master Djwhal Khul, it is said that pain and suffering are essential requirements that enable our planet to carry its very purpose to completion. In other words, suffering is part of the evolutionary impulse for this planet that pushes humanity and all life toward deepened awareness and fruition. But while the other kingdoms in nature are subject to death and disease, none experiences suffering as keenly as humanity. Human suffering is uniquely related to the creative intelligence, to the power to think and to link cause with effect. Pain and suffering are the result of anticipation, memory and imagination. They also stem from our capacity to feel remorse, from a sense of loss or failure and from the deep-seated desire to change and improve our circumstances.

One of these collective memories of loss that often lies hidden and festering in the depth of our consciousness is the vague but sure sense of wholeness and beauty that was once ours. In the innermost core of our being we ache with the dim awareness of our past heritage. We dream of a lost paradise, a place of peace and harmony where we and the people of the world did not know pain, sickness, lack of love, poverty, corruption or death. This primal longing to regain our lost estate, to know ourselves as souls or spiritual beings and to live in an eternal harmony with all of creation is at the root of much of our misery and suffering.

Yet it is this same longing and pain, the knowledge of our fall from grace, that like an inner fire fuels our upward struggle to realize our visions of wholeness and a better world. The pain and suffering that we experience acts to drive us away from the negativity, limitation and isolation of our lower natures. They might be seen as part of a grand design that pushes us past our selfish preoccupation with pleasure and personal satisfaction and opens us up to a new world of greater beauty, goodness and truth.

When we begin to look beyond our misconceptions about suffering, we discover that not only does suffering induce us to free ourselves from our identification with the body and material possessions, it is what enables us to respond to life creatively and with wisdom. It is through the handling of life's problems that we gain experience, learn how to discriminate and acquire the ability to make conscious, deliberate choices. Through the experience of pain we discover what to cultivate and what to avoid.

One of the primary areas where suffering can teach us what to cultivate and what to avoid is in the area of thought. Most of us understand that an unwholesome action brings unwholesome or negative consequences. But we are only just beginning to seriously consider the creative or destructive role that thought plays in creating our experiences of life. Our thoughts can either exacerbate and perpetuate the cycle of suffering, or create peace of mind and a sense of confidence in our ability to respond to life's many challenges. These ideas are based on one of the fundamental principles of all spiritual work, the axiom that *energy follows thought*, that the thoughts we hold in our hearts and minds make us who we are. This idea, that "where consciousness goes so goes the molecule," is currently the subject of much scientific inquiry in the fields of mind-body medicine, biochemistry and quantum physics. Investigation in these and in other disciplines point to clear and convincing evidence that consciousness affects the outcome of events and circumstances. So not only does the quality of our thought create our worldview, it seems that it can actually affect or create our world.

An example of the creative power inherent in thought can be seen in our very attitude toward suffering. Most of us are afraid to suffer. Since we harbor the attitude that pain and suffering are something to avoid, our fear and resistance to it not only hinder the opportunity for growth and development, but actually intensify and prolong the original cycle of suffering. In fact much of the

suffering that we experience is actually created by our anxiety, resistance and fear.

Some of these fears, such as the fear of pain, fear of failure, deprivation and loss are what spawn our selfish desires, expectations, neurotic addictions and ideas about what we think we need in order to be happy. Many of our most prized motives and drives as well as our most despised obsessions have their origins in our unconscious, subconscious or conscious fears. Our fears and illusions about life and about who we really are, our undue attachment to happiness, and our persistent, compulsive willingness to pursue our version of happiness regardless of the costs to ourselves or to others, are at the heart of the dark and twisted roots of our suffering.

In order for us to disentangle ourselves from this murky swamp of ignorance and despair we have to begin to take responsibility for much of our own suffering. We have to stop viewing ourselves as timid and frightened victims helplessly buffeted by the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” Instead we must recognize that we have creative power, that we are the primary architects of our own fate. This begins with the elimination of apprehension, worry and doubt and with the conscious effort on our part to replace our negative thoughts and attitudes toward life with a level of trust, confidence and optimism. It also involves facing the fact that life is fraught with endless challenge and difficulty. Therefore we need to let go of our disproportionate attachment to both happiness and suffering in order to discover the inner equilibrium that comes from being detached from a specific outcome.

One of the most valuable tools to help us find our inner balance and move beyond suffering is meditation. Through the meditative process we learn to rid ourselves of ignorance, attachment and selfish desire. We gain a level of mastery or self-control over the emotions and the mind as we become aware of inner and higher levels of consciousness and learn to function from there. Meditation enables us to contact our spiritual source, the Soul, the source of understanding, love and wisdom within and to express the courage, compassion and insight needed to handle life’s countless and often stupendous problems.

Our shift in focus away from the despair and agony of the lower self to the light and liberation of the Soul can be further accelerated by our willingness to lift the burden of pain off the shoulders of others. In this way we not only learn to take our focus off of our own difficulties and problems, we can do something to ameliorate the unbearable problems of humanity. In fact our efforts to alleviate humanity’s great suffering are the most potent means for creating solace, unity and peace on both a personal and planetary scale.

When we consider that the cross of sorrow and suffering prompts us to transform ourselves and our world, that it shatters our selfish expectations, compulsions and fears and our illusions and fantasies about life, that it burns away the barriers that separate us from one another and teaches us how to discriminate, we can see that suffering is not an affliction or a curse, but the mark of an

outstanding, conscious reaction to life and the environment. Suffering is a spiritual necessity that “awakens the sleeping soul to exquisite life.” It is one of the most effective and rapid means of bringing about understanding, humility and love.