

# **‘Why must we suffer?’ - a psychiatrist reflects’**

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## **Introduction**

Philosophers and theologians have argued about the nature of suffering since we humans developed the capacity for self-reflection, and I dare say the collective intellect of humankind is as much exercised, and as likely perplexed, today as it was in the time of Shankara, or Lao Tse, or the Buddha, or Plato, or Jesus Christ or the Prophet Muhammad; for suffering is a condition of life.

Being a doctor has brought me into contact with a great deal of suffering, both physical and emotional. Now, reflecting on my time in general medicine and psychiatry, and my own life this far, I would like to offer some thoughts about the problem of suffering, what it does to our minds for good or ill, and how we may try to work with suffering to relieve despair and bring hope.

## **What is suffering?**

First I had better define what I mean by the word. I am drawing a distinction between pain and suffering in that pain is a sensation, while suffering means to be aware of what pain signifies. It is a function of mind.

Suffering arises when we learn the meaning of loss – for instance, never to walk again, or to live with the prospect of chronic pain, or to have to face the ending of life, your own or that of others. Less visibly, there is the suffering of loneliness, or alienation, or despair, and of oppression, in which the projected future holds nothing but the desolation of the present.

The list is a long one and accompanies consciousness like a dog its master. At the heart of this is the knowledge that once we have grasped that birth brings with it the inevitability of death, the desire to be well carries with it, consciously or not, the fear of falling ill, and the realisation that happiness, like health, and everything else, is at best ephemeral.

This poignant truth is recounted in the myth of Adam and Eve and their fall from the Garden of Eden on account of eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Their trauma, (the word derives from the Greek for ‘wound’) was to live ever after with a yearning for the paradise they could never regain. But expulsion into the world of birth, ageing, sickness and death also meant growing from Homo innocens to Homo sapiens.

The theme of loss informs all great art and literature. These days it also plays an important part in our understanding of mental health and so I want to start by looking at how the pain of loss shapes the future of every human child.

### **The ordeal of birth**

Let us start at the beginning. Before birth, we now know the baby is actively responding to the environment of the womb. There is plenty going on; the baby is testing out the limits of its world, kicking, sucking its thumb, listening and busy getting on with growing. Amniotic fluid cushions the baby from impact, life is one long feed and there is warmth and the comfort of the mother's heartbeat.

There are occasional disturbances to the well-being of the foetus - the highly anxious mother whose adrenaline is flooding the baby's circulation, or conflict in the outer world, when the baby hears raised voices and angry exchanges, or if the mother has a fall. Despite this, most babies reach full term in a reasonably tranquil state.

Then comes the trauma of birth, which leaves indelible traces in the psyche of the infant. The comfort of the womb is exchanged for almost heart-stopping compression as the birth process gets under way.

Paediatricians refer to foetal distress when the oxygen supply to the baby is seriously compromised, but every baby passes through a rite of passage in which the forces of life and death are pitted one against the other. The terror of suffocation is only assuaged when the newly born is held in the arms of the mother, feeling the softness of her skin, taking in her smell and tasting the sweetness of her milk.

### **The psychology of early years**

Imagine how a child first comes to understand the world. To begin with the baby is at the mercy of unpredictable sensations, like being full of milk or at other times hungry. But what begins as a jumble of sensations soon acquires a rhythm and meaning. Hunger is relieved by crying for the mother, so that before long the feeling states of hunger and satiation get paired. Later, the infant matures enough to know that an absent mother has not disappeared for ever but can be called to the cot by its crying. When it has discovered that its needs can be periodically satisfied, it learns to let go of its mother from time to time and be comfortable with its own inner state. The infant is learning a lesson for life - that human relating is found in perpetual oscillation between the states of merging and of being alone.

As the infant develops, other pairs of constructs begin to structure the sensorial world: big and small, soft and hard, light and shade. This act of discrimination gives to each its special, contrasting attribute. At the same time that this perceptual complexity is growing, a parallel inner conceptual world is evolving. The child learns to distinguish between me and not me, mine and not mine, bad and good, and later, right and wrong, all cognitive steps that are mirrored by an increasing complexity of feeling states.

### **First encounters with loss**

Nature has infinite wisdom in how things should be arranged, provided that we don't mess it up with dogmatic and largely fashionable opinions as to what is 'good for the child'. In the 1940s, a fanatical paediatrician called Truby King urged mothers never to go to their babies except for the four-hourly feed, to teach them 'independence' and thereby causing untold suffering to thousands of babies, some of whom carry the imprint of that deprivation to this day.

All severe privations of childhood leave their mark and an infant can only respond to overwhelming loss in one of three ways - to take refuge in withdrawal, to become clinging, or to learn to survive without any attachments, a development which leads to psychopathic disorder in later life.

In contrast, the child with a healthy and confident attachment to its mother can risk losing her for a time, not least out of sheer curiosity to explore the world, which may be a matter of just going into the next-door room. When something frightening happens, real or imagined, the child runs back to the safety of its mother. Similarly, the loss of the comfort of breast milk is more than compensated for by the excitement of tasting different foods. Childhood at its best is a great adventure, in which the child plays the hero protagonist of the drama. Key dramatis personae come and go, while the child holds centre-stage. This confidence and security is the greatest gift that parents can give a child.

Then comes the challenge of the wider social world. Every young person will feel frightened at times - the fight/ flight response is built into all of us, and where there is a serious risk to our safety, emotional as much as physical, the barriers go up to keep out the perceived threat. We all have ego-defences in place; but this is only to be expected, unlike the extreme hypersensitivity that results from emotional insecurity.

The first day at school is etched into most people's memories. The child is no longer at the epicentre of the social world. But this big loss can be managed if kindly teachers step in to help, there are friends to be made and the lessons are fun. Then the child goes home with pride in a new accomplishment. But it is not always such a happy occasion and school phobia is a major problem for child psychiatry services.

So far, I have focussed on how losing what we count as safe and familiar is built into the blueprint of life and how, in the right measure, it can be the spur to growth. It holds true whether for that first day at school, or the young adult brave enough to fall in love and run the risk of being jilted, or when facing a life-threatening illness, or for the person whose career falls apart but who manages to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

### **The neurophysiology of emotion**

The mind is not reducible to the brain, but it certainly can't do without it. Take the fight-flight response mentioned earlier. When a threat is perceived, the brain tells the adrenal glands to release adrenaline in preparation for fight or flight; this is accompanied by the emotions of anxiety and fear. (In fact, an injection of adrenaline will have the same result.) Importantly, the fear may equally be triggered by what is imagined, so that an insecure child, for example, cannot tolerate the absence of its mother without becoming anxious because of its fantasy of abandonment. On the other hand, circulating endorphins, which are opioid peptides produced by the pituitary gland and hypothalamus in the brain, induce an immediate feeling of well-being. Nature makes us this gift in the first few hours of life, for endorphins reach peak levels in the mother's bloodstream during labour and are imbibed by the baby in its first feed, enormously facilitating the bonding between them.

However, the nerve centre of emotions, so to speak, lies in a specialised neural structure in the white matter of the brain called the limbic system. This 'limbic brain' mediates the basic emotions common to all the

mammals. For example, removal of its amygdala nucleus leads to passivity while over-activity (as may occur in epilepsy) can cause aggression.

The brain has further evolved during the more recent evolutionary history of the primates and the limbic system is now buried deep beneath the neocortex, or grey matter. In the case of the human being, the neocortex has massively expanded to form the frontal lobes, the seat of reason and empathy.

The problem for humankind lies in the way the limbic system and the neocortex don't pay much attention to each other, and not infrequently are at odds. This evolutionary birthright is a blessing or a curse, depending on what we do with it. In the case of the well-functioning human ego, reason and emotion are able to work together, and they serve us faithfully, enabling us to love, to bond and, through facing the many challenges of emotional conflict, to grow in maturity. But when the same biological legacy results in our being ruled by our emotions, they become ruthless tyrants, dedicated to destroying anyone or anything felt to be a threat to self-survival. Before the advent of modern technology, this served to protect tribal and national identities but coupled with science, the result has been disastrous. Over 100 million people were murdered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more than in the whole previous history of humankind.

### **Life without soul**

Not for nothing has 'mind, body and spirit' become the mantra of holistic healthcare and I now want to put the spotlight on soul. If my thesis is correct, much of the suffering we see today is on account of denial of the soul in a post-modern secular world, in which case treating disturbances of mind and body without reference to soul is deeply misguided.

The use of the word soul to mean the spiritual essence in every human being does not have to imply the survival of consciousness after bodily death, as atheists and humanists will avow. Just as water finds its own level, people will incline to their own deepest level of meaning, and if their existential concerns can be comprehended within the compass and purpose of a single lifespan, well and good. Yet many of us have a steadfast belief in the indestructible essence we call soul that transcends the temporal bounds of birth and death.

Unfortunately, in the Western world, there has been an intellectual schism between materialist science and metaphysics, which has grown steadily over three hundred years. The dominant worldview of the last century has been that of a mechanical universe. Karl Marx called religion 'the opium of the masses' and Sigmund Freud described it variously as 'a universal obsessional ritual, a reaction to infantile helplessness and a mass delusion.' Despite such pronouncements, surveys have shown that well over two thirds of the population continue to believe in God or a 'higher being'. However, for people who do not belong to a faith tradition, the significance of an afterlife is dumbed down by a society that no longer cherishes any such belief and often it is only when faced by a crisis such as life-threatening illness that these concerns come to the fore.

## **The existential void**

Many people, aside from the distraction of consumerism, are left deeply puzzled about what life is for. For those that have children, there is the hope that the love shown them will bear fruit in the course of their lives. No less important is the value of friendship and community, while for others there is the wish that one's work will contribute in some small way to the progress of life on this planet.

However, when mental distress reaches a certain pitch, none of these expectations can entirely sustain a person. Worse still, the crisis may follow on the failure to make a success of one's work or when a family is breaking-up. What then is left that is worth living for?

The life instinct is a powerful inborn force and the foundation of the human ego. Small surprise that many psychiatrists treat suicidal thinking as the cardinal sign of depression. But is it necessarily so? It is always tempting to pathologise the existential anguish that leads a person to ask 'is there no purpose to my life anymore? Am I a failure? Should I give up? What's the point in going on when I cannot feel love, only despair?'

In the face of such misery, mental health professionals are liable to distance themselves from the anguish that is being expressed. This may be understandable, but it won't be much help to someone needing to explore his or her spiritual resources when facing an existential crisis.

What are called for are openness, empathy and genuine interest on the part of the psychiatrist, coupled with a wide spiritual frame of reference. Unfortunately, unlike the general public, less than one third of psychiatrists hold a spiritual or religious outlook. The great majority subscribe to a physicalist worldview and this makes it all the harder to venture into the inner world of their patients and be open to solutions that acclaim a person's innate spirituality.

There is a great irony here. Psychiatrists who cannot draw on their own spiritual resources will experience far greater pressure coming from their patients because they feel all the more obliged to provide answers. For someone in deep distress, the psychiatrist, short of God, is where the buck stops. However, it is unwise to be drawn into playing God. It is much better to go with that question to the place where a person can find the answer, by asking it of their soul. The psychiatrist will greatly help by keeping faith with the ultimate goodness of the universe at a time when it may be utterly lost to the patient.

## **Intimations of hell or heaven**

I indicated earlier how no sooner is the developing ego celebrating its mastery over life than it is faced with intimations of its own decline. Pain, unforeseen injury, the realisation that relationships cannot be forced, disappointments in love, the loss of loved ones, and the certain knowledge of one's own ageing and eventual death, compel us to relinquish the cherished dreams of yesterday in favour of the stark truth that we do not, and cannot have, control over much of what happens to us. It would seem that from a perfect beginning, we are destined for a miserable end.

Everyone wants to be happy, but happiness is not a right, neither is it something that can be bought or borrowed. If our ego defences could give way gracefully to the inevitability of personal loss, we could be consoled in the

knowledge of the greater gain – to have contributed to life, the welfare of others and even to have advanced the soul a little. But though the neocortex provides us with the intellect needed to address the task, the limbic system will have none of it. Reason and emotion are at odds, and the greater the degree of neurosis, the more they battle it out; where love is lacking and the emotions are unchecked, human beings survive by finding their place in the pecking order, a hierarchy governed by domination and submission. The basic need is for safety - from hunger, attack and isolation - and the behaviours that will secure this are driven by primitive emotions; envy, jealousy, dependency, hostility, along with all the negative attributes of the ego - contempt, arrogance, ruthlessness, and manipulation.

How different in a loving home! There, the self, feeling itself well loved, has love to give, and to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19: 17-18, Matthew 22:39) is a natural response, for giving to another means also to give to oneself. This happiness that comes of giving help whether to individuals, communities or causes, entails a paradox as found in the Gospels. 'For he that has, to him shall be given; and he that has not, from him shall be taken, even that which he has.' (Mark 4:25)

Such a statement is counter-intuitive. Surely those with the greatest need are the most deserving? But when we look at the misery wrought by neurosis, we find that the failure of relationships usually stems from the desire to obtain from the other what feels to be lacking in the self. Once the honeymoon is over the battle begins, for no one wants their energy and their love extracted to fill the void in the other.

From the psychiatric point of view, here lies the rub. It is hard for people who have been seriously abused, deprived or otherwise traumatised to feel much love for themselves, and neither can they easily love anyone else. What gets called love is in fact need, which is not about giving but taking.

The egotistical behaviour that results comes from a lack of healthy ego development. Insecurity and poor self-esteem, not infrequently coupled with compensatory self-inflation (narcissism) actually point to this underlying deficit. When there is no trust in the goodness of self or other, life becomes an obstacle course to get through by resorting to manipulation.

### **The future in our hands**

There has been much confusion about the meaning and purpose of the ego, for just as a knife can cut bread or kill, so the ego can be an instrument of destruction or creation.

The passions of the ego show us what it means both to love and hate. Where love and security are lacking, aggression is the instinctive response to a perceived threat to the self and its possessions - just try taking a bone from a wild dog. Yet a dog that loves its master will yield the bone, for it trusts that loss is followed by gain – maybe getting stroked, or taken for a walk, which in turn strengthens the bond of affection. People are not dogs but there are some similarities! People who can love and trust others are willing to risk being vulnerable, and to show openness and a generosity of spirit. Such persons are far more likely to share in mutually rewarding and stable relationships.

I don't want to suggest that the human being is simply controlled by punishment and reward but I am describing the difference between a fixed

defensive pattern of behaviour and being open to new experiences. The implications of a difference such as this will probably determine the future of the human species. We have an evolutionary history of tribalism rooted in fight/flight mentality based on the ego under threat, just as we see to this day in the behaviour of insecure children. In contrast, secure, happy children show something very different – the capacity to grow into adults who value not competition but co-operation.

Co-operation is a sure sign of spirituality in action. There is an old story that compares Heaven and Hell. In Hell, lost souls are seated around a large dish of appetising food. They are obliged to use spoons with handles longer than their arms but since no one can get their spoon to their mouth, they are all starving. In Heaven, they must use the same spoons, but instead everyone sets about feeding each other.

### **Spirituality East and West**

There is a commonly held assumption that spirituality necessitates a suppression of the ego. It is my impression that this never really works, since the ego constantly fights back. The skill is to find a way to liberate the self from the negative and limiting aspects of the ego.

Different religions go about this in different ways. For example, in Buddhism, desire and attachment are regarded as the cause of suffering. The Third Noble Truth teaches that ending desire, which leads naturally to letting go of attachment, brings suffering to an end. But in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the accent is on suffering and redemption. Suffering is seen to be a necessary spiritual challenge and a profound test of faith, as recounted in the story of Job. The most extreme challenge, the 'dark night of the soul', is that of feeling abandoned by God. Jesus himself cried out on the cross, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani', or 'Lord, Lord, Why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:46).

Although I was brought up in the Anglican Church, I have been influenced by the spiritual traditions of both East and West. Personally, I like to picture the influence of soul on the ego rather like a good parent dealing with a wayward child. As the ego becomes infused with soul virtues, its agitation subsides, it becomes more peaceful and its energy can be put to good purpose. But such a child needs understanding, loving and forgiving, so that reconciliation can take place, and a new start made.

It is no accident that the systematic study of mental disorder has flourished in the West, where we have a history of fascination with the contents of the individual psyche that began with the Renaissance. In the East there is a more pragmatic tradition, of freeing oneself from burdensome mental contents by purifying the heart through meditation. Consequently there are cultural differences towards the negative aspect of the self.

The Buddhist and Hindu approach is to concentrate on right conduct and the development of wisdom that will influence successive incarnations according to the law of Karma. Daoists hold that all life depends on the harmonious flow of qi. There is no such thing in itself as badness, only the manifestation of the imbalance of yin and yang, and goodness is held to arise naturally when the rhythms of the cosmos are understood and honoured. But in the West, we mostly turn away from nature and struggle with our 'demons'. Excepting spirit release (which has not found acceptance in mainstream

psychology), western secular spirituality seeks to find healing in bringing the 'Shadow' to consciousness and divesting it of its power by integrating it with the psyche, where Christianity underlines the need for repentance, as in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-32). In stressing the importance of repentance, Christianity and Islam are united. The Koran states that repentance is the most noble and beloved form of obedience in the eyes of Allah.

### **Suffering, individual and collective**

In the title of my talk, I ask why it is we have to suffer. This is a very western kind of question since it implies that there is an answer, rather than suffering simply being a fact of life. Yet it is a worthwhile line of enquiry since, from the transpersonal perspective, the soul always incarnates with an agenda perfectly attuned to its chosen circumstances. A soul that incarnates as a Buddhist has one agenda and the soul that incarnates as a Christian has another. In the case of Christianity, the hope is that pain leads to gain, since it is held that God never sets us a challenge it is not in us to overcome.

People with mental health problems are certainly among those who have taken on lives of great suffering. Nevertheless, it is my belief that each soul is provided with the exact requirements for the journey ahead, the lessons to be learned, the knowledge to be gained and the opportunities that will be needed. And yet, all this is subject to our free will, so we are instruments of our own spiritual destiny.

It may seem callous to suggest that a person's suffering might be in the service of helping another awaken to the qualities of caring and concern and, who knows, if these are two souls working out their karma from a previous life, to make reparation. But to take the greatest exemplar in human history, by willingly submitting to torture and execution, Jesus offered to awaken the conscience of the world. This highlights the ambiguous status of psychiatry, for had Pontius Pilate been in the position to order a psychiatric examination, imagine what may have happened – no crucifixion but instead detention under the Mental Health Act! And before we dismiss Judas Iscariot as a thoroughly bad character, we must remember that without him, the law of the prophets could not have been fulfilled. Is it right to condemn him? Possibly he was entrusted with the most difficult task of all the disciples.

Indeed, from the transpersonal perspective there is no such thing as a bad experience. The soul regards a single lifetime as we might look on one day in the year, and each life is but a very small corner of the field of action. Ultimately there is only the gathering in of experience, the expansion of consciousness and, always, the opportunity for transformation.

Though karma may be rooted in the behaviour of individual souls, collective karma is no less important. Genocide can never be condoned or excused, but it happens, like everything else, for a purpose. The Jewish Holocaust raised the conscience of the world by several degrees. Yet, tragically, there has been constant genocide since that time, for example, in Biafra, Uganda, Cambodia, Rwanda, the Balkans and Iraq. How bad does it have to get before we learn to break the cycle of persecution? The cycle can only be broken one way, with forgiveness. This is something not in the power of the human ego, for forgiveness comes from a higher place.



## **Why should we forgive?**

People who have suffered profoundly, be it from child abuse, or rape and torture, or severe mental illness, or spirit possession, or from genocide or the impact of natural and man-made disasters, are faced with the need to find forgiveness, whether of God for his allowing it, or the Devil for doing it, or humankind for carrying it out, and this is just about the hardest thing in the world to do. Yet without forgiveness, anger will have a deeply corrosive effect on a person's life. Far from letting go, that person remains trapped in hurt and anger, and this can last a lifetime and more.

This is the pivotal point of development that confronts every individual and equally the whole world community. How can we use the many and deep wounds of life to help raise the consciousness of this planet to a higher level?

The workings of the limbic brain make sure we live in a state of high emotional reactivity. Our personalities clash and compete, we jealously pair, bond, and raise children, and each make our temporary impression on the world. This is all to the good, otherwise we would have nothing to learn in the classroom called life. Yet the need of the ego is always self-protective and as long as the self is felt to be separate from, and different to, all other selves, the fight is on.

Mainstream psychotherapy is primarily concerned with helping people make their best adjustment to this state of affairs. In contrast, psycho-spiritual therapy invites the soul to speak, and it tells a very different story. Since the soul transcends the body, it does not know death, and can therefore view all the comings and going of life with compassion and serenity. It is in the original nature of soul to want nothing more than for the incarnated self to outgrow the narrow concerns of the ego and become conscious of the beauty and unity of life. From this quiet place within, we can observe ourselves being tossed around by the drama of life with a kindly and loving eye, much as we would watch the antics of a child. The intended lessons are plain to see, in the here and now, and we don't have to wait for Kingdom Come.

As a psychiatrist, I am not claiming any special knowledge of the ways of soul. All rivers lead to the sea and I am simply speaking about the one I know best. It is a river of tears, tears shed in anger, tears shed in sorrow and tears shed in despair. It is, in places, a raging torrent and a river to drown in, unless a person is prepared to swim hard! But when someone has come through the ordeal, there is pride in having made the effort, in facing one's worst fears and in discovering new strength.

To stay well means to find wholeness, in other words healing, or else one falls into the same river all over again. The ego is indifferent to healing, since it is more occupied with things of the world like ambition and success. But healing is the soul's greatest desire. In a world driven by the human ego, every human being inflicts and receives pain. Yet throughout the whole turbulent business of growing up, the soul is flexing its muscle, in small ways at first, showing kindness, the expression of sympathy, concern for others and charitable acts. All this is premonitory to an occasion that, sooner or later, will challenge every person to his or her core, and which calls on the soul to give of its very best.

This occasion is invariably one that deeply tests a person's capacity to forgive. It means finding love for those that have badly hurt you. A recent book

by Immaculee Ilibagiza,\* whose family were slaughtered in the Rwandan Holocaust, is an inspiring such account. In the midst of her terrible grief, she came to recognise through prayer that even the killer of her family was God's child as much as she, and face to face she was able to forgive him.

Forgiveness is the supreme test of love. Jesus spelled it out like this: 'Love your enemies, bless those that curse you, do good to those that hate you, and pray for those who treat you badly and persecute you, so that you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven' (Matthew 5:20). Just as the symbol of transformation, the lotus, cannot flower without its roots in the mud, the burgeoning soul finds an opportunity for forgiveness in every hurt given and received.

Desirable though it may be, a person cannot always forgive, and it is not for anyone to try to insist. What I have generally found, though, is that people would wish, if only it were possible, one day to be able to forgive. This is because despite the outraged ego, the soul impulse cannot be killed off. Once we make contact with the desire to forgive, however improbable it may seem, we are starting out on a journey of love in which we too can be forgiven, find redemption and, at last, return to where we began - the Garden of Eden, no longer the garden of innocence but of wisdom.

\* Ilibagiza, I (2006) *Left to Tell* Hay House Inc: Carlsbad CA

Dr. Andrew Powell's publications on Spirituality and Mental Health can be downloaded from the publication archive of the Website of the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists UK, see: [www.rcpsych.ac.uk/spirit](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/spirit)