

SUFFERING as a Pathway of Spiritual Self Development

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Have you ever asked why so many people suffer greatly in life? Is there a reason for it all or is it all futile. Wouldn't it be better to live a life where there was no pain, no growing old, just blissful contentment? Or would it really be better?

Today, man's average life span has increased when compared with that of previous ages due to the marvellous advances in modern medicine and awareness of nutrition, health and safety issues. Many centuries ago three out of ten children survived into adulthood and adult life expectancy was about forty five years compared with today's average of about seventy five. Yet, whilst the external conditions were harsh, one would be inclined to think that those people would have suffered greatly. But no, their inner lives were actually filled with wondrous imaginations and feelings of folk lore, of religious experiences and traditions of which we can barely comprehend due to our present constitution and disposition. Death was not feared as they knew that they would live on as they were in close contact with those that had departed. In India, in past ages, the people were uplifted into the spiritual realms by inspired epics such as the Ramayana where for short periods of time they could experience the Gods as they were in previous periods of earth development. Here the people experienced the magic of bygone times, the flying chariots, the magical weapons, the conflict of good overcoming evil. So when their physical bodies were experiencing the harshness of life in eking out an existence the spiritual world was living their inner lives, hence, the pain of physical life was not as a great burden as would be the case today.

On the other hand, today, even though many outer causes of suffering have diminished and external life has never been better and easier, people are not as contented and inner fears and insecurities are increasing. It appears that as time progresses man's inner life is becoming emptier, devoid of the rich content and feelings of past ages to the point where individuals have only themselves to confront as their inner content. Many try to escape this confrontation of themselves and their inner emptiness by over-identifying with things of the external world,- such as their possessions, family, friends, status in life, TV, rushing from one external social stimuli to another, etc in the mistaken belief that these will replace the need for a meaningful and consciously acquired inner content. These alleviate the confrontation with the self only temporarily. For those who hang on to the past for answers and try to live life as it was then will sadly be disappointed as evolution will leave them behind and does not wait for those who try to hold it back. We need to look for what is appropriate for our present situation and evolution. Previously, materialism did not exist; there were no computers, motor cars, television, drugs, economic rationalism etc. Hence we need to adapt the past ways of living to suit today's conditions or else further suffering will occur.

The suffering caused by external pain, either through illnesses or accidents is more or less understandable in terms of an individual's response to it and needs no further explanation but now let us look at inner suffering. The more serious of these situations has led to an increasing number of people attempting to take their own lives or getting caught up in a life of drug abuse, alcoholism, depression and gambling so as to escape the reality of the emptiness of their own inner lives. When we look around us we can see many situations where inner suffering occurs more or less depending on our outlook on life; The retiree who loses his sense of purpose after he retires; The student who does not achieve the academic results expected of him; the parent's anguish at the son who failed become a doctor; Not being able to keep up with the neighbours in terms of possessions; The fear of violence generated by the news media; the preoccupation with illnesses.

There was a program on SBS which depicted the lives of the Sikh community up north near Coff's Harbour and there was a mother of a family shown where the sons had married Australians. From the expression on the mother's face she was suffering constantly because of this. She said that because of

the mixed marriages she was regarded by the community, mainly the women, as having failed in bringing up her sons properly. In this situation the suffering seems to have been caused by over attachment to earthly customs even though this is quite understandable.

It seems, in viewing the situation superficially, as if evolution has played a cruel trick on mankind, in that as the outer physical conditions improve then the inner suffering increases but as with all things with our creation there is a just reason.

Why then is man's inner being becoming empty or hollowed out as time moves forward thus **leading to a progressive increase of inner suffering?** And **is there a purpose to outer physical and inner suffering?** One answer to these questions has been provided by Rudolf Steiner through his spiritual insight and relates to the purpose of man's existence.

We now need to examine the origin of suffering and for that we need to go back into a previous stage of man's evolution.

Briefly speaking, our present earth stage can be divided up into seven major epochs or periods of development. We are in the fifth of these stages and which can be called the Post Atlantean Period. Two more epochs are to follow before the end of this earth cycle at which time the earth will dissolve into a state of 'pralaya'.

The third stage of the earth's development can be called the **Lemurian** period and is associated with that time when the earth became solidified to the time when mammals first made their appearance. Only here can we, for the first time, speak of the individual man. Here, man's actions were largely instinctive and were determined by spiritual beings external to him. Before this time we can only speak of man as a group soul in a similar way that we speak of the animal group soul today such as that of the lion. Man's consciousness or inner being existed in a blissful state within the 'bosom of God' or in other words his conscious was one with the spiritual world. This condition can be called the Golden Age of the Hindus or the Paradise of the Christians and Jews. Although man was conscious he was not yet conscious of himself as an individual. His consciousness was like that of a one year old child. He felt himself to be part of the whole divine world. Physical death, if one could call it such, was experienced like putting on a new set of clothes. Here man felt himself to be immortal and he was immortal as death did not touch his inner being. The reason for this was that Man's physical body was totally unlike our present physical bodies. It was extremely rarefied, invisible to our present eyesight and he lived in the sphere of the clouds above the earth.

The important point to note is that man's inner life was filled with the contents of the divine world and all his actions were determined from without, directed by beings external to himself. Yet this was a state of blissful contentment; a state virtually free of suffering, pain and death however **man had no FREEDOM** or awareness of himself as an individual.

At this time, spirits in opposition to our immediate creators interfered in man's intended course of evolution. This is symbolised by the descent into ignorance of the Hindus; the taking on of 'Trishna'-thirst for existence or the Jewish/Christian/Muslim temptation and the expulsion from paradise. Man now descended further into matter than was intended by his immediate creators and he now attracted mineral substances to his physical body. At this time reincarnation, death and suffering began but at the same time man now had the possibility of knowing good from evil and the possibility of enlightenment in **freedom** and this is what man is evolving towards.

Man then evolved through time, through various civilisations and races, progressively incarnating further into matter and experiencing its harsh reality as he **gradually lost his direct connection with the divine spiritual world** but at the same time he developed up the power of thinking and became self conscious. Today, many individuals have evolved to the point where their inner lives are virtually

devoid of externally given content that gives them meaning and direction, but the main characteristic of this empty inner life, devoid of externally given content, is that individuals need no longer be impelled to act from outside forces working through their inner being or from externally enforced traditions but through objective thinking and feelings they can act entirely from out of their own impulses. Hence, **freedom is now possible.**

Now that we have seen the origin of suffering where does it fit into this journey towards freedom? Well what then is freedom? Is it not the ability to undertake an action where the impulse for this action originates **entirely from within an individual?** If we are to act entirely out of ourselves then we also must have the possibility of committing both good and evil actions. If then we are to act entirely out of ourselves does not this mean that our inner lives must only be filled with what we have placed there. Hence any external impulses whether from the gods or from traditions that cause us to act means that we are not free in that action. So now we can see that the reason why our inner lives will become progressively emptier and that is to allow for the possibility of true freedom. If, on this journey towards freedom and enlightenment evil or **selfish** actions are committed, then we form new karma and in the fulfilment of karma suffering may be encountered. We will now look at how suffering is one of the means of the fulfilment of our karma.

Karma - is known as the law of cause and effect where an individual's actions causes a reaction generally in another life. One can look at Karma from several perspectives such as **world or epoch karma**, national or group karma and **individual karma**. When looking at suffering World and individual Karma play a large part.

World or Epoch Karma

We have situations through man's history where a large part of humanity share in common experiences due to the physical and spiritual environment into which they incarnate into. Individuals have no choice but to be born into and experience these situations collectively.

Today a large portion of the world's population is being propelled into materialism and intellectual thought. This process began around the fifteenth century and within one hundred years there will not be a place on earth where one can escape its influence. Hence all souls reincarnating, will have, as part of their own individual experience & development the world karma of materialism to deal with.

It can be said that as part of **world karma** that evil and suffering will increase before the good will be victorious. So that man does not sink into evil forever Spiritual Philosophy, which was previously taught, only in inner secret spiritual sanctuaries to the most advanced students, can now be taught openly as mankind has evolved sufficiently to be able to comprehend and wisely use these truths.

Individual Karma

Only one who is clairvoyant can see the true nature of karmic events associated with individuals hence, one should not ever judge another as to why one suffers in life. It may not be because of a individual's karma that he suffers but world karma which takes precedence over individual karma. The spiritual world is not able to prevent all innocent suffering as in an earthquake or war but the undeserved individual suffering will be compensated for in a future life. **The knowledge of individual karma should be used only for judging oneself and not others.**

An example of the operation of individual karma is as follows:-

Hatred in one life lead to **hypersensitivity to suffering** in the next life which then leads to obtuseness and lack of understanding of the surrounding world in the third life.

From the above example we see that hatred is metamorphosed into hypersensitivity to suffering in the next life. There are many people who suffer because of trivial events. Maybe they carried hatred within themselves in their previous lives and further, if nothing intervenes then the suffering continues into the next life as the hypersensitivity will again be metamorphosed into a mental dullness towards the world.

Karma can be worked out in two ways either consciously and with much effort or unconsciously through suffering, as in the above example, disease, accidents and external pain. If there are not sufficient individuals who choose to work out their karma consciously then the goal of earth evolution will not be achieved and a bleak future will be in store for the new embodiment of the earth as all our actions from the past and into the future is the actual 'substance' from which will arise, out of the state of pralaya, the future embodiment of the earth.

World karma is reducing the impact of external suffering and directing karmic adjustment inwardly. In fact in no time in man's history are the external conditions of life so easy. For instance many previously fatal illnesses are cured today by antibiotics. However that is only half the job, the other half is to add the **spiritual education** to overcome the deficiency which the external illnesses was to compensate for and **if this does not happened** then other means are found to karmically compensate this deficiency **through inner suffering, through emptiness of life** until the person is encouraged into consciously working on himself.

If the outer and inner conditions were too comfortable then mankind would inevitably end up languishing in this comfortableness without any making any progress hence it has been ordained that this would not be so. In the future this inner suffering will become immense. For those that take up the conscious pathway of self development the impact of inner and outer suffering can be made bearable or even avoided.

One can become aware of one's deficiencies due to karma and thereby avoid potential illnesses by correcting the soul defect and thereby avoiding the necessity of catching the disease or experiencing suffering but it must be acknowledged that this is very difficult to accomplish with today's consciousness. Hence, if one is hypersensitive to suffering one can, through Spiritual Philosophy, become aware of the causes and take steps to rectify the further consequences of one's karma through hard work and effort (its not easy) or other wise karmic adjustment will occur through outer pain and inner suffering.

An exercise which we all can undertake is as follows:- When something unpleasant befalls an individual one can develop the thought or picture that one has caused this unpleasantness to oneself so as to compensate for some transgression in a previous life. If this attitude successfully accomplished then this will lessen the impact of suffering that one experiences. There are those who have suffered immensely and have accomplished marvellous deeds which they would not have done had they not been subjected to suffering. This was illustrated recently in a film depicting a man who lead a mediocre existence in a housing estate in England. The estate, as with most government housing estates had a major drug problem. When his son died through an overdose he said enough was enough and organised a large group of residents to confront the drug pushers in a non violent manner. This greatly reduced the drug problem in the estate. But would this man have accomplished this deed, which was at a great personnel danger to himself , without experiencing the suffering caused by his son's death? I'd say not likely.

AT THE END OF EARTH EVOLUTION ALL INDIVIDUAL KARMA WILL BE COMPENSATED FOR IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER.

But the choice is ours as to whether it will be through suffering or through conscious hard work which leads towards enlightenment and freedom in selflessness and creativity.