

THE MESSAGE OF SUFFERING

By Narayan Mahapatra

Suffering, wrongly regarded as an evil and the work of the dark forces, is the common experience of every person in this world. It may vary in degree and nature, but no one can claim immunity from it as long as they have desires and cravings. Suffering is known to have an educative and corrective value, but deeper and more significant are its spiritual lessons, which are often lost sight of.

Those of us who are acquainted with the doctrines of karma and reincarnation know that suffering is the result of our evil actions done in this or in previous lives. Its intensity and duration depend on the nature of the action and the motives that prompted it. Suffering does not come as a punishment; it is a natural reaction to an action that we ourselves have performed. It sets right the equilibrium of the universe, the order and harmony of which is upset by a person's wrong, unjust, and harmful actions. We live in a world in which the thoughts and deeds of individuals, races, and nations are interconnected. Since the phenomenal world and all its creatures are manifestations of One Life, no event can be completely isolated from another. No experience or thought of an individual can be completely separated from those of their neighbor.

The purpose of suffering is not just to restore the disturbed harmony of the universe, but also to advance the sufferer spiritually. "Your tears are your tutors," said a wise man, and this is literally true. Our wrong actions, wrong decisions, and mistakes are all within the cosmic plan—the ultimate purpose of which is evolution. The human being is at the apex of this evolutionary process but is by no means perfect. The growth of the human soul is like that of a mighty tree from a small seed. It grows in gradual stages from life to life through experiences of various kinds until it matures and, transcending the ordinary human weaknesses, rises to the stature of a superman or Adept. Its human evolution is then complete and it no longer has any need for reincarnation. Thus the soul's journey to perfection is a long one, and each soul has to pass through a variety of experiences, pleasant and unpleasant, in order to learn the deeper lessons of life.

These, we learn more from our painful experiences, from our sorrow and suffering, than from those that are agreeable and congenial. As Annie Besant wrote:

The world is, after all, only a school, a training academy, and no experience, however painful or ridiculous, is without its uses and values to the thoughtful man. The evils that we come across only make us wiser, and the very blunders

we make serve us in good stead for the future . . . We must look upon every painful incident as a step towards spiritual progress.

—*The Doctrine of the Heart*

The poet, Tennyson, tells us that it is the tears, fears, and sorrows of life that give it its proper shape and make it useful.

Life is not an idle ore,
But iron dug from central gloom,
And heated hot with burning fears,
And dipped in baths of hissing tears,
And batter'd with the shocks of doom,
To shape and use.

—In Memoriam

But a certain attitude and way of life must be adopted if suffering is to be turned to spiritual advantage. We must bear it with what the Master K.H. described as “a serene fortitude.” The same Master said, “good and evil are not to be measured by events on the lower or physical plane” (*The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*). This means that what we consider to be evil on the physical plane may not be so when viewed from a wider range of vision or from a deeper level of life. It may be a stepping-stone to spiritual advancement, and, therefore, a really useful experience. Or it may be a retreat, arising not from defeat but as a necessary preparation for victory. A mistake, a wrong action, a painful experience may appear to us as an evil on account of our limited vision, just as a tactical retreat may appear to be a defeat to an ordinary soldier who is not aware of its larger strategic purpose.

Thus, suffering can make us wiser and mark a distinct move forward on our spiritual path, only when we bear it cheerfully. An attitude of calm composure in the face of sorrow and suffering will root out anger and ill feeling towards those whom we may suppose to be responsible for our distress. If we pass the test of our bitter experience, our further progress is assured. Not only this, but the balance of our evil karma will be lessened and thus another difficulty in our spiritual journey will have been removed.

Students of Theosophy should bear in mind another fact in this connection. As Geoffrey Hodson says in *The Pathway to Perfection*: “When deep suffering is inevitable, special watch is placed upon the individual that no overweight is placed upon him, and that the strain and the pain do not exceed *Karma's* just decree and the soul's power educatively to endure.”

It will be seen, then, that whatever happens around us or within us is for the best. Perhaps we see so much cruelty, injustice, and suffering that it is difficult to believe that good always triumphs over evil, or that all these things are part of an ordered

progress. Yet this is the truth and can be seen to be so by one who understands even a little of the magnificent and eternally beneficent plan.

To sum up, suffering may be turned to spiritual advantage by adopting an attitude of calm endurance. Such an attitude will have its effect on the entire nature of the sufferer. His weaknesses and evil tendencies will tend to lessen, and his lower nature will gradually undergo such a transformation that he will sense a new peace and joy in his life. He will know from his experience that "whatever is, is best."