

# **HOW TO PUT PAIN TO A BENEFICIAL USE**

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As adversity proves the mettle of man pain brings him out in his true colours, as it were. It is at a time when man is overwhelmed with pain, physical or mental, that one can gauge his character. High sounding philosophy one may preach but how one lives it in life and that too when overcome by calamities does in a great measure sum him up. None can deny that this world is an experience of pairs of opposites, love and hatred, pleasure and pain, sympathy and jealousy, co-operation and competition and so on. One of these pairs is acceptable but the other is unpalatable. The wheel of time, however, stops not to suit anyone's taste. It moves on and along with it sorrow and happiness too move into every man's life in succession, sometimes in rapid movement, sometimes slowly. There is no escape from this wheel for anyone.

Every one knows this: knows that youth and vigour are short-lived, that death succeeds birth as sure as night follows day. But the atheist, the agnostic and the materialist tell us to 'make hay while the sun shines', enjoy most when you can. They, however, forget or deliberately omit to add, 'and suffer while you cannot'. Aye, that is a verifiable phenomenon. Man is not even able to suffer patiently, having spent all his energy in enjoyment. If we keep open our eyes and ears and observe, we shall find how those who rush madly into the vortex of unbridled enjoyment find themselves left high and dry by the very senses that dragged them into it, when suffering relentlessly pursues them. Man's senses are like the fair-weather friends, letting you to fend for yourself when misery overtakes you; that is to say, pursuit of pleasure impoverishes man and makes him unfit to face life as it changes, — the least pain, the least misery, exasperates him

Again, as we have already seen, the very texture of this web of life is such that misery and happiness form its warp and woof and one cannot exist without the other. Pain cannot be ignored, for it presses itself on to the forefront and makes itself felt. Denying it has no meaning, nor suffering it as an inevitable evil bring us any credit. In an age where utility takes the pride of place among the incentives to man's action he must try to see what best use he can make of pain. To what use can misery be put? When we know it is sure to come in spite of all our efforts to avoid it, we must get prepared to accept it with equanimity. How can

this be done? By remembering that pain, like pleasure, is shortlived and bearing it without much ado, by taking it in our stride. That is what Sri Krishna taught Arjuna. 'The sense contacts, O Arjuna, result in heat and cold, pleasure and pain, but they are coming and going and are impermanent, therefore endure them.'<sup>1</sup> This endurance (*titiksa*) is one of the six qualities that are mentioned by the seers as the equipment that is incumbent in our journey towards the Highest. Endurance has been defined as, 'bearing of all afflictions without caring to redress them and at the same time being free from anxiety or lament on their account'.<sup>2</sup> If it is asked how to reach such a state when we are in the region of its antipodes, there is but one answer. And that is: by practice. We may remind ourselves of what Sri Krishna told Arjuna regarding the control of the mind: *abhyasa* and *Vairagya*, practice and detachment, he said, were the only way to do it. In every way of life, in every pursuit it is practice that makes us perfect. If you want to swim no amount of reading books on swimming can help you to learn it. One must get into water and struggle. A life-belt may help you in the beginning but if you depend on it always you may not drown but you will never learn to swim. A strong desire backed by immense exertion alone can achieve success in any walk of life. So also is the case with a religious aspirant. For him practice of virtues is a supreme necessity, being a step forward towards his goal. Now, to reach that state of calm acceptance or indifference to pain and pleasure we have to fall back upon something which we know to be more than all these little flashes of joys and sorrows, to be everlasting, eternal. But simple knowledge alone does not help. An awareness of that spirit in every day life and faith in its redeeming power are also necessary.

Pain makes us aware that life in this world is not a smooth sailing; there are tempests and gales which are to be faced. It makes us conscious that there is a power which is beyond all comprehension, yet controls our destiny. To the forgetful man it is a warning that something unpleasant awaits him always round the corner. It is a lesson that men should learn but unfortunately, generally, do not. But those who do are not afraid of afflictions. They come to understand that along with distress there comes from that same source the power to endure, if only they have the faith. There is a prayer of Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, the heroes of the *Mahabharata*, which bears ample testimony to this fact: 'Let afflictions come to us always, O Lord, so that we may be able to behold you again and again. For beholding you results in effectively cutting off all further births'.<sup>3</sup> Is such a prayer incompatible with healthy living? Is it melancholy of the morbid type?

It is possible to pass off hilarity and affected cheerfulness to be a healthy way of living. But is that a fact? No, hilarity brings in depression in its wake and affected cheerfulness, to borrow an expression from

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<sup>1</sup> Bhagavad Gita, II.14.

<sup>2</sup> Vivekachudamani, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Bhagavata, I.8.25.

Swami Vivekananda, is putting roses over the festering sores, and calling it beautiful. There is a criterion by which one can judge whether the pessimism of a religious aspirant is that of a sick soul or what is born out of the penetrating wisdom which pierces through the hollowness of all the transient things of the world. The pessimism of such a person does not invade those around with defeatism, nor is he himself overcome by helplessness. Kunti along with her sons had to pass through ordeals and vicissitudes which many a staunch optimist would have shrunk away from, or in facing which would have gone under. But they withstood all and were prepared for the next fling of fortune with calm, but not slavish, resignation. There was dignity in their suffering. Their life does not make us hopeless but infuses strength and faith in ourselves. Under such circumstances can we call the prayer of Kunti a morbid taste for suffering? On the other hand, those who can see, will find in it a direct challenge to destiny: to do what it might and see whether they are found wanting. Such undaunted spirit surely cannot be engendered by brooding over the injuries and insults one has suffered from. That is the spirit which almost comes near the description of a person of 'steady intellect' of the *Gita*. 'Unmoved in affliction, unattached to pleasures, devoid of attachment, fear and anger, such a sage is said to be of steady wisdom.'<sup>4</sup> So this imputation of morbidity does not hold good in their case, as also in the case of other sages and saints who had to pass through similar circumstances.

Sometimes pain becomes the foreteller of a great event in a person's life; a metamorphosis, as it were, happens in one's outlook on life. It has happened in the case of those who later became great saints. A waylaying robber was shocked into awakening that his very near and dear ones were not ready to share the burden of his sins which he committed in order to maintain them. There was no physical pain but what mental anguish he must have passed through! And the result was the emergence of a brilliant sage who has made himself immortal by his great epic, the *Ramayana*. Another was the commentator on the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata*, Sridharaswami. Thrown into misery by the passing away of his wife, Sridhara did not weep or wail but was stunned. The veils of delusion were forcibly torn away from before his mind's eye. The whole play of this worldly phenomena became an open book for him and there and then he renounced. The example of Buddha is a household word to need repetition. He was moved by the suffering in the world, though its burning flames had not personally touched him. Instances can be multiplied but we presume these are sufficient for our purpose.

## II

Just at the beginning of this century there was a movement

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<sup>4</sup> Gita, II.56.

prevalent in some of the Western countries which was called the religion of healthy-mindedness. Prof. William James, the great Psychologist of his time, refers to this movement in one of his Gifford Lectures<sup>5</sup> wherein he cites many instances where cures had been effected in the case of several ailments by this religion of healthy-mindedness, where man naturally refused to be intimidated into thinking of evil or pain. If we carefully and critically go through the instances that he cites we find that it was the trust in God more often than mere optimism that could buoy the practicans up and save them from sinking into the morass of distress. These people had found out that moping and whining and weeping is not the way to face pain, but to create a positive approach: to refuse to be cowed down by misery and put trust in the ultimate good.

Should we then be unfeeling like stock and stone? Sri Ramakrishna gives us the answer. Once a gentleman who had lost his eldest son was brought to Sri Ramakrishna for consolation in his afflicted state of mind Sri Ramakrishna first sang a song which called for alertness and vigilance against death:

'To arms! To arms, O man! Death storms your house in battle array!

Bearing the quiver of knowledge, mount the chariot of devotion;  
Bend the bow of your tongue with the bow-string of love,  
And aim at him the shaft of Mother Kali's holy name.  
Here is a ruse for the fray: You need no chariot or charioteer:  
Fight your foe from the Ganges' bank and he is easily slain.'

Then he said: 'What can you do? Be ready for Death. Death has entered the house. You must fight him with the weapon of God's holy name. God alone is the Doer. I say: "O Lord, I do as Thou doest through me. I speak as Thou speakest through me. I am the machine and Thou art the Operator. I am the house and Thou art the Indweller. I am the engine and Thou art the Engineer." Give your power of attorney to God. One doesn't come to grief through letting a good man assume one's responsibilities. Let His will be done.

'But isn't your grief for your son only natural? The son is one's own self reborn. Lakshmana ran to Ravana when the latter fell dead on the battle-field. Looking at Ravana's body, he found that every one of his bones was full of holes. Thereupon he said to Rama: "O Rama, glory be to Your arrows! There is no spot in Ravana's body that they have not pierced." "Brother," replied Rama, "the holes you see in his bones are not from my arrows. Grief for his sons has pierced them through and through. These holes are the marks of his grief. It has penetrated his very bones."

'But house, wife, and children are all transitory; they have only a momentary existence. The palm-tree alone is real. One or two fruits have

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<sup>5</sup> Collected in book form entitled the *Varieties of Religious Experience*

dropped off. Why lament?

'God is engaged in three kinds of activity: creation, preservation and destruction. Death is inevitable. All will be destroyed at the time of dissolution. Nothing will remain.'

What do we gather from this advice of the Master? It does not decry man's feeling for his kith and kin, on the other hand it is unnatural to be unfeeling, but at the same time it stresses that separation from the near and dear ones and anguish on that account cannot be eliminated from this world; that the only way to go beyond pain is to have recourse to God, who is the repose of all. He makes our burden lighter. Did not Jesus declare, 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'?<sup>6</sup> This is the message of hope that you hear from all God-men.

### III

Summing up we have that pain is an inevitable ingredient in the life of beings. It can be countenanced effectively first of all by discrimination, through the knowledge that pain being transient cannot be everlasting; secondly by turning the bitter experience to profit by making us dive deep into ourselves, or, if you like to call it so, to turn Godward. There is a passage in the *Mundaka Upanisad* which speaks of the nature of the *jiva* and how it transcends from its lower nature to the higher. 'Two birds of bright plumage, always associated, closely cling to the same tree. One of them eats the sweet fruit while the other looks on without eating. Seated on the self-same tree, the *jiva* moans bewildered by his impotence to overcome grief and his limitations. But when he sees the other, the Lord, worshipped by all and His glory, he then becomes free from grief.'<sup>7</sup> That is the way to overcome the sting that is in misery.

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<sup>6</sup> St. Mathew, XI,28.

<sup>7</sup> III.i.1-2.