

Perspectives on Suffering

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Commonly Held Personal Views on Suffering

- “When your number comes up. There is nothing you can do about it.”
- “The reason people suffer is because they make the wrong choices.”
- “Suffering purifies the soul, like refinement of metal in the fire.”
- “The really important lessons in life come through suffering.”
- “Suffering and pleasure are two sides of the same coin, you can’t have one without the other.”
- “Suffering occurs randomly amidst a broken world.”
- “There is no answer to why suffering exists; it is not our place to know.”
- “Suffering happens as a function of the natural evolutionary process.”

Common Perspectives on Suffering

- A group of ways to make sense of suffering based on conversations with others.
- Usually not intentionally chosen viewpoints.
- Most have strong feelings about certain perspectives.
- A few have very strong feelings about suffering and are not open for discussion.
- We can have more than one perspective on suffering.
- Our perspective may change throughout different seasons of life.

Fate /Karma Perspective

- Suffering occurs because
 - “That’s the way it is.”
 - “It’s in the cards.”
 - “When your number is up, there is nothing you can do about it.”
- Suffering is a predetermined scheme.
- Comforts
 - The world is orderly and follows a plan
 - There is control in the universe
 - We are responsible for suffering
 - Everything makes sense
 - Peace and calm without acceptance
- Downsides
 - Passive involvement
 - We can not change fate
 - Helplessness

Reaping and Sowing Perspective

- Suffering occurs as a result of wrongdoing, i.e. breaking rules or codes or sins.
- Conversely, mortality is rewarded with health, riches and happiness.
- Comforts
 - Individual can control suffering
 - World is orderly and just
 - Suffering is not random
- Downsides
 - Guilt is added to suffering
 - Suffering is required as penance

Purifying Perspective

- Suffering occurs as a challenge to purify the soul (sanctification) or to build character.
- Pain is sent with a goal in mind.
- Survival build strength and cleanses from sin.
- Comforts
 - We are selected or special
 - We are not responsible for suffering
 - Activates fighting / coping mechanisms
 - A positive outcome may be achieved through suffering
- Downsides
 - Suffering is associated with positive outcome.
 - Increasing the challenge
 - Possibility of failure

Learning Perspective

- Suffering occurs in order to teach and to help an individual or community to learn a much needed lesson.
- Corollary or purifying perspective but the goal is knowledge verses holiness.
- Comforts
 - We are selected and special
 - We are not responsible for our suffering
 - Activates reflective / learning response
 - A positive outcome may be achieved through suffering
- Downside
 - Suffering is associated with a positive outcome
 - Raises questions about association of learning and pain
 - Possibility of failure

Counterpoint Perspective

- Suffering must exist as a counterpoint or opposite to pleasure.
- A positive cannot exist without a negative.
- We can not know pleasure or good except in contrast to evil.
- Comforts
 - We are not responsible for suffering
 - A positive outcome may be achieved through suffering
 - A greater appreciation and capacity for pleasure
- Downsides
 - Feelings are illogical
 - Increased isolation – God is distant and dualistic.

Broken World Perspective

- Suffering occurs as a result of a fallen world or cosmos.
- The entire world is broken and evil is powerful.
- Comforts
 - Suffering is not the result of our sin and wrongdoing – the world is broken
 - Promise of healing and restoration
 - Presence of God as a co-sufferer
- Downsides
 - Helplessness
 - Anxiety due to random nature of suffering
 - Questions of justice

Mystery Perspective

- There is no answer to the WHY of suffering.
- It is foolish to waste your time trying to find meaning because a) suffering is meaningless and or absurd b) it is not our place to know why suffering exists
- Comforts
 - No guilt or fault is assigned
 - No struggle for meaning
 - No specific outcome is necessary or assigned
 - Comforting to place trust in God or someone else
- Downsides
 - Denies natural struggle for meaning
 - Can create distance from God

Evolution Perspective

- Suffering occurs as a result of natural evolution and natural selection.
- Comforts
 - We are not responsible for suffering
 - No specific goals must be obtained
 - Improvement of the entire species
- Downsides
 - Does not deal with origin of system of evolution