

Benefits of Suffering

It is only through suffering and difficulties that one can attain true happiness and prosperity. The Qur'an says:

".....But Lo, with hardship goes ease; Lo, with hardship goes ease; so when you are relieved, still toil, And strive to please your Lord " (94:5-8).

Hegel says: "Disputes and evil (suffering, to be precise) are not imaginary; they are quite real and with open eyes they are steps for evolution and goodness. Struggle is the law of progress".

Human attributes are evolved and made in the battlefield and riot of the world, and one can reach high perfection only through hardship, responsibility and distress. Life is not for satisfaction, but for evolution.

Ali ibn Abi Talib said in one of his famous letters to Uthman ibn Hanif, his governor in Basra, that living in comfort and delicateness and avoidance of difficulties ends in weakness and debility, and on the contrary, living in rough conditions makes a man powerful and agile and transfers his existential essence towards refinement. He also reproaches him, in the letter, for having had a dinner with the rich who had allowed no poor for the evening. He then gives the example of trees in forests and gardens. Although constant care is taken of garden trees, yet the deprived tree of the forest has a better quality.

This is why when God is kind to somebody he inflicts him or her with difficulty and suffering. (Exactly the opposite of what most people think) Imam Muhammad Baqir¹ said: "Allah (God) helps his believer and sends him hardships like presents which a man sends for his family."²

Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq³ said: "When Allah loves His slave He drowns him in the sea of suffering."⁴

Like a swimming tutor who throws his new student into the water and makes him struggle and learn swimming, Allah does the same to perfect his beloved slaves.

If one reads a whole lifetime about swimming, one will not learn how to swim. We have to go into the water and struggle with the danger of drowning, and then we will learn swimming.

"The most difficult lives are possessed first by the prophets, then those who come after them in virtue."⁵

Sa'di of Shiraz says⁶ "Sa'di has spent all his life with bitterness that now you hear his name with sweetness."

The educational aspect of suffering can be seen in Rumi⁷, the great Sufi philosopher and poet of 13th Century, where he makes the point clear with this analogy: "They threw a grain on the earth; then came out branches. Next they crushed it in the mill; it became more expensive and useful in bread form. Next the bread was grounded under the teeth and after digestion became mind, spirit and useful thought. Again when the mind was bewildered with love, what a surprise this cultivation had been!"⁸

Another universal point that we should mention here is that opposites produce opposites.

Existence and non-existence, life and death, permanence and non-permanence, youth and oldness are linked with each other. This dialectic is the natural law of this world. Sa'di said:

"Treasure and snake and flower and thorn and sorrow and happiness come together."⁹

Rumi can clarify the point again where he says: "Hardship can bring the treasure, and happiness lies in hardship. The core becomes fresh and pure when the skin is scratched away. Oh brother! Dark and cold places, struggling with sorrow and fighting against laziness and pain, is the fountain of life and intoxication; since all this greatness lies in lowness."¹⁰

So, if we want to attain true happiness, we have to go through all the difficult stages. Great men, in fact, suffered from torture, poverty, imprisonment, deprivation and even death, and this is why they became great. We will end this section with a sentence by Mulla Sadra¹¹: "If there was no opposition (contradiction) in existence, the continuance of benefit from the Merciful God would not have been possible."¹²

¹. The 5th Imam after the Holy Prophet.

². Majlisi, Bihar al-anwar, New Edition: vol. .67, p.213.

³. The 6th Imam, or carrier of wisdom after the Holy Prophet.

⁴. Majlisi, Bihar al-anwar, vol. 67, p.208.

⁵. Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq narrated from The Prophet Muhammad. (Bihar al-anwar, vol. 67, p.200).

⁶. Great Persian poet of 13th Century.

⁷. His full name is: Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi Mawlawi.

⁸. Mathnawi, Book 1.

⁹. Collected works.

¹⁰. Mathnawi, Book 2.

¹¹. 18th Century Persian philosopher.

¹². Asfar, vo1.3

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