

## Session 2: The causes of suffering

Last session we looked at the nature of the human condition and that there is a certain inevitability of encountering pain. Jesus talked about sun and rain being upon both righteous and unrighteous. The Buddha described our experience of life being unsatisfactory. The actor and presenter, Stephen Fry, raged against a possible All-powerful, all-knowing God as being 'capricious' and 'evil' for allowing the pain we experience (and the suffering, which is the reflection we have about our pain).

*Opening quick discussion: what are the things we tend to complain about in life? If a child were to sum up experiencing something that happens that they don't like, how might they put it?*

The African-American poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar, speaks of the experience of the slave:

**I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,  
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,  
When he beats his bars and would be free;  
It is not a carol of joy or glee,  
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,  
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings –  
I know why the caged bird sings. (*I know why the caged bird sings*)**

There is a heartfelt plea for things to be different, to be other than we experience them in this moment. Our ability to reflect upon our situation, the pain we encounter, the joy that passes, is the key to our suffering. We don't like things as they are and we want them to be as we would desire for them to be for us.

*Reading: Psalm 88*

The Psalmist cries out for life to be other than it is. This is entirely natural. To want to suffer would be a pathological masochism. To want to inflict suffering would be a pathological sadism. The Psalmist wants the situation changed, but God is to be the agent of that change. The depths of the writer's suffering come through not being able to understand why things aren't changing.

*Discussion: What does it mean for 'God to be the agent of change'? Is this fair, unfair? Is it the case that God should be seen as needing to take responsibility for change?*

*Video clips: Application Denied/"Give us the vote"/"The first to cry" (Selma, 2014)*

In the first clip, Annie Lee Cooper has attempted to register for the vote five times. Each time she is denied because the system allows for the registrar to require any question to be answered regarding the constitution and its application. This was used time and again to prevent literate and skilled Black Americans from exercising what was by then their constitutional right. In the second, King is demanding change. In the final clip, King consoles the grandfather of the murdered activist Jimmie Lee Jackson, killed as a result of actions taken in the demand for change.

*Discussion: taking the clips as a whole, what are the different forms of suffering? What causes each of them? Is one particular form of suffering greater than another? How do you feel about King's words that "God was the first to cry"?*

We have looked at suffering from the example of slavery and civil rights? Could it not be said, though, that all suffering is a form of slavery to pain? That pain could be induced by events, people, situations in which we live, but the common factor is that we want something to change. We can't abide things as they are, or at the very least to attempt to abide in them is proving fruitless.

The great wisdom teachers all talked about the root of our experience of suffering as being our grasping attempts to want things to be other than they are (we will hang fire for now as to whether or when this is legitimate):

**Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.** (*Jesus, Matthew 6:21*)

**The origin of suffering is tanhā: grasping, craving, desire for what we don't have.**  
(*The Buddha, Second Noble Truth*)

For both Jesus and Buddha, it is what we hold on to, or our grasping for what we don't have, that defines us. However, it is a grasping rooted in ignorance - ignorance of what needs to be accepted as it is, ignorance of how to change those things which can and perhaps should be changed, ignorance of how our desires affects others and bring about suffering elsewhere.

**If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.** (*Jesus, Matthew 19:21*)

Jesus identifies what it is that would liberate the rich young man from his own sense of imperfection and dis-ease but the man, in his ignorance of what would bring him a greater sense of peace, cannot be torn from his wealth. Therefore, he remains in pain, dis-ease (and probably now with an unspoken sense of guilt!).

**Man's world is what it is due to greed, hate and fear  
We never seem to have total control of our passions.  
Sometimes good, sometimes tragic, lonely and sad  
Only Divine wisdom can alter our reactions** (*Tom Zart*)

Greed, hatred and fear are what feed our ignorance and bring about suffering.

*Discussion: Can we suggest other examples of how greed, hatred and fear impact on us as individuals? In what ways do they cause suffering between people as well?*

*Take home exercise: over the next week think of several things you desire to be different. Which do you think would be legitimate things to change? Which do you think are due to the three 'foods' of ignorance - greed, hatred and fear?*