

The Meaning and the Use of Pain

by: Annie Besant

A lecture given at Blavatsky Lodge.

Published in 1910 and 1932
Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Chennai [Madras] India
The Theosophist Office, Adyar, Madras. India

[Page 1] I PROPOSE to take for tonight a matter which is full of deep interest, I think, to everyone, as everyone comes in the way of it — the Meaning and the Use of Pain. First of all as to the meaning. You may remember that when I was speaking here, I think the last time, I tried to explain to you something of the nature of man and the way in which man's true Self, his innermost Self, was to be regarded as the man working in the different bodies or sheaths, and so manifesting consciousness in different ways. You may remember that I laid considerable stress on the fact that it is always the Self that is working, and that if we want to understand the human constitution we must realise that the spiritual Self lies at the root of all activities, and that the different characteristics of the activities depend not on a difference in the Self, but on a difference in the medium — or the qualities — through which he is at work. Now, I want you to start with that conception tonight, adding to it another which I think I mentioned previously, but which is essential for the work that I have to do [Page 2] now — to explain to you the meaning and the use of pain.

The spiritual Self is conscious on his own plane from the very beginning. Offspring of the Universal Consciousness, what else could he be? But as he descends into this manifested universe, and as he clothes himself in body after body, or in sheath after sheath, the eyes, so to speak, of the Self become blinded by these successive veils that he wraps around him, and so when he arrives at the lowest stage of his manifestation — this physical universe in which we are — the Spirit has become blinded by Matter, and is no longer conscious of his own high destiny or of his own essential nature in the physical universe.

Now, it is this blinded Self, as we know, that comes into the manifested universe for the sake of learning and of gathering experience. Let us think of him for a moment as wearing those bodies that by this time must have become so familiar to you — the body in which he *thinks*, the mind or mentality; the body in which he *feels*, that we generally speak of as the “body of desire”, because feeling and desire are so very closely connected, and feelings of pleasure and of pain arise from contact with things from without, which work on this body of desire, and make it to be either attracted to or repelled from external objects.

Think, then, for a moment of the Self clothed in this body of desire, and blinded by it to his own [Page 3] real nature and to the true conditions in which he finds himself. He will be attracted by all sorts of external objects; attracted by those from which he gains the sensation of pleasure, repelled, of course, by those from which he feels the sensation of pain. So that coming into this world of which he knows nothing, you must remember, for I am taking him in the very earliest stages of his experience — coming into this world of which he knows nothing, he will naturally be strongly attracted to that which gives him pleasure by contact, which makes him feel that which he recognises as joy or happiness or content. Thus attracted to everything which appears to him desirable, he will often find that the gratification of desire is followed by suffering. Attracted by the desirable object, and without experience which would enable him to distinguish and to discriminate, he flings himself, as it were, towards this attractive thing, only knowing that he feels

pleasure in the contact. Presently out of this contact, which was pleasurable, pain grows up; and by that pain he finds that he has flung himself against something that is not desirable, but repellent. And over and over and over again he will have this experience; constantly reiterated he will find this lesson, which is taught him by the external universe.

Let us take two very common animal appetites which, thus attracted and gratified by pleasure, turn into sources of pain. Let us take that of [Page 4] attractive food, which would work on the sense of taste, which is part of the body of desire; this food will attract the sense of taste, and the unconscious Spirit — unconscious, that is, on this plane as to the results that will follow — is run away with by this pleasure of contact; if I may repeat the old Eastern simile that I have used so often, that the senses are like horses that are yoked to the chariot of the body, and that carry away the Soul towards the objects of desire. He will gratify, then, the sense of taste to excess; he will pass into gluttony. The result of this gratification of the sense of taste without experience will be the pain that will follow on the over-gratification. So again if he gratifies the sense of taste, say by over-drinking, by the taking of alcohol. There again pain will follow on the gratification of the immediate desire. And when this has been repeated over and over and over again, this Spirit — which as mind is able to *think* — connects the two things together, connects the gratification of the desire with the pain which follows on that gratification, and in this way he gradually comes to understand that there are laws in the universe connected with his physical body, and that if he comes into contact with those laws and tries to violate them, he will suffer as a result. It is just as though a person flung himself against an invisible wall and was bruised by the contact. Over and over again a person might thus fling himself, attracted by [Page 5] some object visible on the other side of this invisible barrier but if he bruised himself every time, he would learn to connect the going after that object with the pain which he felt. Thus there would grow up in his mind the idea of sequence, of cause and effect, of the relationship existing between the gratification and the suffering which followed after it; in this way there would become impressed on this infant mind that is learning its lessons, that there is something in the world that is stronger than itself — a Law which it cannot break; a Law which it may endeavour to violate but which it cannot violate, and which will prove its existence by the suffering which is inflicted when the Spirit flings himself against that barrier. And thus with object of desire after object of desire this lesson will be learned, until an accumulated mass of experience will gradually be gained by the Spirit, and he will learn by pain to regulate his desires and no longer to let the horses of the senses gallop whithersoever they will, but to curb them and rein them in, and permit them only to go along the roads that are really desirable. Thus the lesson of self-control will be the result of this painful experience.

Now it may be said here, or thought, that after all we have this body of desire in common with the lower animal, and that the lower animal is in one curious way distinct from man: that it is mostly guided to the avoidance of this painful experience by what we call instinct; that while man has the [Page 6] experience constantly until he learns self-control, the animal by an innate inherited experience, as it has been called, which we speak of as instinct, is, to a very great extent at least, preserved from this experience of pain. And that is so. Observing the fact, we ask the reason. And the reason is not far to seek. First, I ought perhaps to say, in order to guard against possibility of mistake, that people to some extent exaggerate the force of instinct in the highest animals. In the lower animals the rule of instinct is fairly complete. In the higher animals it is less complete than in the lower, and some experience is often needed by them before the instinct becomes a thoroughly safe guide for them. And the reason in their case, and the deeper reason in our own case, is this: that in man you have not only to deal with this body of desire — which, if it were alone, would be guided by an external law, which would direct it towards the objects that were healthful and health-giving and make it avoid the objects which were fatal or dangerous — but you have in man the coming in of the Soul: that is, of the individualised Spirit, which is not to be compelled by

a Law from without, but evolved by a Law from within; it is not simply to be forced into conformity with outside Nature by the compulsion to which the mineral, the vegetable, and the animal kingdoms are subjected; it is no longer the case of evolution in the aggregate, of the [Page 7] collective evolution which, in order that it may take place effectively, must be under the control of an external Law. Man is to take his evolution into his own hands; his evolution is to be by experience and not by compulsion; for at this period of evolution Spirit has become individualised by the sheath of mind, and the accumulating experience of the reincarnating Soul is to take the place of the compulsory education of the lower realms in Nature.

And so it is the presence of manas, or mind, in man that makes this element of pain so necessary a part of his education. He is able to remember, he is able to compare, he is able to draw this link of relation between the things that form the sequence of events; and just because he has this power of thought, of mind, he is able to take his growth into his own hands, that he may become a fellow-worker with Nature; not merely a brick as it were in her edifice, but a self-conscious builder, taking part in that building of the whole.

And so gradually by this education of pain, working upon mind through the body of desire, this knowledge of Law in the external universe grows up. So that here the meaning of pain is hostile contact with Law, the effort to break Law that never can succeed; and the use of pain is the gaining of the knowledge of Law, and so the guiding and the education of the lower nature by the reasoning intelligence. [Page 8]

Let us pass from that view of pain to another. By pain this growing Soul has learned the existence of Law. The next use that is found in pain is a deeper one. By pain is rooted out desire for every object in the external universe, found, in the language of the *Bhagavat-Gītā*, to prove one of “the wombs of pain”. Desire is that which draws the Soul to re-birth; desire is that which fundamentally causes the manifestation of the universe. It was when “Desire first arose in the bosom of the Eternal” that the germ of the manifested universe appeared; and so always it is desire that leads to manifestation — whether of the whole or of the part; and desire continually draws back the Soul over and over again to earth. Notice that it is desire which draws the Soul *outwards*, always outwards, to the external. And the education of the Soul consists in this passing out into the external, gathering there all knowledge, and then by experience losing its taste for the external, and carrying inwards the knowledge it has obtained. But suppose that objects of desire remained desirable, then there would be no end to the revolution of the wheel of births and deaths; then there could be no garnering, as it were, of knowledge, and no real evolution of the highest possibilities. For remember that human perfection is not the end of our growth; it is the end of the present cycle; but this is only the preparation for another, and those who become [Page 9] perfect men in the present cycle are those who, from the calmness of Nirvāna, are to come out in the next period of manifestation, no longer men to be educated, but Builders and Gods to guide the next manifested universe, passing on into that higher sphere of activity and utilising there the experiences that here they have won. It is thus essential that these manifesting Souls that today are human but in future millenniums are to be divine — it is necessary that they shall not only gather knowledge but shall also carry it back with them, and so make it part of their own future being; and in order that this may be done, desire must gradually change its nature until at last it vanishes away. The objects of the lowest external world must become undesirable to the Soul that has gained knowledge; the objects of each phase of the external world, subtle or physical, must become undesirable; everything must become undesirable save the Eternal, which is the essence of the Soul himself: and so gradually the Soul learns by pain in the

physical universe to get rid of desire.

There is no other way in which desire can be conquered. You might, if there were no pain in the gratification of these external desires, you might by strong will hold back the horses and prevent them from galloping along the road along which you did not choose that they should go. But you want to do more than hold them back by [Page 10] force — that is a very elementary stage of the progress of the Soul: you want them no longer to *desire* to gallop after these objects; that is, you want to cut off the very root of desire, and that can only be by the objects that once attracted losing their power of attraction, so that they no longer can draw the Soul outwards; then the Soul, having exhausted everything that he can learn from the object, and having found it productive of pain in the end, no longer finds it desirable, but casts it aside, and carries away only the knowledge he has gained. For the Soul is like the bee that visits the flower; it does not need to remain always in the flower, it needs only the honey that the flower contains; when it has gathered the honey, the flower is no longer desirable to it. And when the Soul has gathered the honey of knowledge from the flowers of earth, then it is the use of pain that he no longer feels desire for the flower; he has gained from it all that is needed for the lesson, and the pain destroys desire and throws the Soul inward on himself. If you think it over at your leisure you will not, I think, be able to invent any other way of really getting rid of desire. And unless you can get rid of desire for the things of the physical world, you will never feel the inner drawing, first to the things of the mind, and then to those of the Higher Life, which it is the very object of the Soul's evolution to make the experience of all that are born into the world. [Page 11]

But what other use has pain ? We have found out two — the learning of Law and the gradual extirpation of desire. The next lesson that we learn through pain is the transitory nature of all that is not of the essence of the Spirit himself. In one of the many allegories of the Hindu Scriptures you may read how the God of Death looking at men and sorrowing over their sorrows, wept as he contemplated Humanity; and as the tears of Yama dropped upon the earth they turned into diseases and miseries which afflicted human kind. Why should the pity of the God have been turned into scourges for the torturing of man? These allegories are always worth thinking over, for always under the veil of the allegory is hidden some truth which reaches you the more surely because of the simile under which it is veiled. What is the God of Death? He is as it were, the incarnation of change. Sometimes we hear of Yama as Destroyer; the truer word is Regenerator; for there is no such thing as destruction in the manifested universe. Always that which on one side is death; on another side is birth; and that which is change and which seems to destroy, is that which in another aspect is giving new form and new shape to the life which is seeking embodiment. And so Yama, the God of Death, is the great representative of change — the change which marks manifestation, the change which is in everything save in the Eternal itself; and inasmuch as [Page 12] he who is change incarnate weeps over men, it is natural that his tears should be the things that teach men the transitory nature of all that surrounds them. And these miseries and diseases into which turn the tears of the God of Death are the lessons which in guise of pain bring the most useful teaching of all — that nothing that is transitory can satisfy the Soul, and that only by learning the transitory nature of the lower life will the Soul turn to that in which true happiness and satisfaction must lie. Thus, the teaching of the transitoriness of all things is the object of these tears of Yama, and he shows the deepest compassion in the lessons that by pain he gives to human kind. For in this fashion, by disease and misery, by poverty and by grief, we learn that everything that surrounds us — not only in the physical world, but also in the region of desire, and in the region of the mind itself — that all these things are changing, and that in the changing he who is changeless may never find his rest. For at heart we are the Eternal and not the transient; the centre of our life, the very Self within us, is immortal and eternal, he can never change nor die. Therefore, nothing that changes can satisfy him; nothing over which Death has

power can bring to him final happiness and peace. But he must learn this lesson through pain, and only in that learning lies the possibility of final joy. Thus the Soul also learns the difference between the stages of [Page 13] transitoriness; very slow are these lessons in the learning, and many a life it takes to complete them. At first the Soul will not think of the Eternal being that in which he must rest; but he will learn to turn from the physical to the mental, to turn from the sensuous to the intellectual, because relatively the one is permanent to the other, and the happinesses of the mind are lasting as compared with the pleasures of the body. And in the slow course of evolution that lesson is learned long before the lessons of the Spirit are touched, and man becomes a higher creature when he has learned to dominate the animal side and to find satisfaction in the mind and in the intelligence, so that the pleasures of the aesthetic tastes overbear the pleasures of the body, and the pleasures of the mind and of the intellect and of the intelligence are more attractive than the pleasures of the lower senses.

Thus man is gradually evolving today, and the great work of human evolution at the present time — speaking of the average human evolution — is not the evolution of the Spirit, but this evolution of the relatively permanent as compared with the senses, and of the body in which the waking consciousness of man is still so active. So that what man on the average needs to do is to turn his desires from the transient to the relatively permanent, and rather to cultivate the mind and the intelligence and the artistic side of Nature, instead of seeking the gratification of the senses which he has in common [Page 14] with the lower forms of animal life. And those are helping human evolution who are turning away from the life of the body and are training themselves in the life of the mind, who are seeking the relatively permanent; although in its turn it will be found to be transitory, still it is a step upward, it is the drawing away of desire from the body to the mind, from the senses to the internal organ, from sensations to ideas and images, and that is part of the experience of the indrawing Soul, which draws himself away from the senses and fixes himself for a while in the inner organ of the mind. And then that inner organ is also found only to give rise to things that are transitory. See, yet, how great is the gain for conflict between men is over when the desire turns to the intelligence, to the inner organ instead of to the outer things of sense. The things of sense are limited; and men fight the one with the other in order to get their share of the limited quantity. The things of the tastes, the higher tastes, and of the intelligence are practically unlimited, and there is no conflict between men for them; for no man is the poorer because his brother is richly gifted artistically or intellectually; none has his own share diminished because his brothers share is great. And so humanity progresses from competition to co-operation, and learns the lesson of Brotherhood: that the richer you are in intellect the more you can give and the less you need grudge, seeing that we [Page 15] are going upwards to the Higher Life where all is giving, and where none desires to seize for self. For in this middle region of intellect and of the higher tastes and emotions, there is no need for grudging; but all may share what they have, and find themselves, after the sharing, the richer and not the poorer for the giving.

But even then it is found that satisfaction does not lie that way, for still it is of the nature of desire. On this I pause one moment. On the realisation of the principle that I am now going to put to you depends the whole direction of your life. If you seek gratification of desire you will never find happiness, for every desire that is gratified gives birth to a new desire, and the more desires you gratify the more open mouths there are which demand that they shall be filled. Says an ancient Scripture:

As well might you try to put out a fire by pouring upon it melted butter,
as try to get rid of desire by filling it with the objects of desire.

— a saying that is worthy your long and thoughtful consideration. For if happiness does not lie that way, then the great majority of people, especially in civilised lands, are on the wrong road to happiness: they will never reach it along the road they travel. And if you notice the demand of modern life, it is always for more of the same thing which is already possessed — that is, for the multiplication of the objects of desire, and so the [Page 16] continual increase of the longings which cannot be gratified. I might put it in a somewhat rough form which comes to my mind, because it was quoted to me the other day as an illustration of the way in which, with the narrowness of thought, this idea of more and more of the same thing comes out increasingly. You remember the story of the rustic who was asked what would make him completely happy, and he said: “To sit upon a gate and swing, and chew fat bacon all day”. Then he was asked: “Suppose you could have something more to make you happy, what would you ask for ?” And he said: “More swinging on a gate, and more fat bacon”. Now, that is a rough way of putting it; but it is essentially the answer the majority of people make. They may have a higher desire, I grant, than sitting on a gate and eating fat bacon; but the principle of their desire is the same as the principle of the rustic — that they want more of these things that they already possess, and that they do not realise that happiness does not lie in this increasing gratification of desires, but in the transmuting of the desire for the transitory into the aspiration to the Eternal, and the complete changing of the nature from that which seeks to enjoy to that which seeks to give. And if this be true, then in your search for happiness you had better consider on what line you are travelling; for if you be travelling along the line of the gratification of desire, [Page 17] then no matter how much you refine it, you are travelling along a road that is practically an endless circle, and that will always leave you unsatisfied and never give you the bliss which is the natural goal of the Spirit in man.

And thus after a while, by this absence of satisfaction, which is pain, the realisation comes to the Soul that this is not the road, and he grows weary of change. All these outer objects of body and of mind lose their attractive force; weary of the change which he finds everywhere in the lower world, he no longer goes outward but he turns his face inward and upward. He went outward to the senses and failed; then he drew into the mind, but the mind is outward from the standpoint of the Spirit, and again he failed; always beaten back by pain, always beaten back by the dissatisfaction that is the most wearisome pain of all. And then, finally, he learns his lesson, and he turns away from that which is without; he turns within; and then he finds the beginning of peace, the first touch of real, of essential satisfaction.

And another use of pain, a more inner lesson now: for we have reached the point where the Soul has distinguished himself from the body of desire and even from the mind itself. And still he has not got outside the reach of pain, for he has not yet quite found his centre, he is only seeking it still; and although he knows that he is not the body, nor the senses, nor the mind, he still finds [Page 18] himself susceptible of pain that comes from within, of contacts that translate themselves as pain. And coming into contact with others — with the thoughts and the feelings and the judgment of others — he constantly finds himself pained by misjudgements and mistranslations, by unkind thoughts and unkind feelings; and if the Soul has by this time gained wisdom, as he must have done if he has followed the path along which we have been tracing him, then he will begin to ask himself: Why do I still feel pain? What is there, not in the outside, but in *me* that gives rise to pain? For he has now passed beyond the ignorance which makes this outer thing appear as the inflicter of pain, and he relates to himself the element that causes pain, and realises that nothing can touch him save himself, which is in truth responsible for all. And if he feels pain the cause of pain must lie in himself, and not, after all, in the external object; for if the Soul were perfect, nothing that is outside could avail to give him pain; and if he feel pain, it is a sign of imperfection, that he is not withdrawn wholly from the lower nature which is not himself. And then he begins to use pain instead of merely feeling it; and there is a distinction between the two. He is no longer at the mercy of

pain, but he takes pain into his own hands as an instrument and uses it for his own purpose; when he finds this pain — we will say which comes from unkind action, or from misjudgement of motive or of conduct — the [Page 19] Soul takes the pain in hand as a sculptor might take a chisel, and with this instrument of pain he strikes at his own personality, for he knows that if it were not for this personality which is selfish, he would not feel the pain at all, and that he may use the pain as a chisel to cut off this personal weakness, and so remain serene and untroubled amid the conflicts of the world.

For thus has it been with all those who have risen above personality, those great and liberated Souls whom we speak of as Masters, and who always work for the world, no matter how the world misjudges Them. It was said by one of Them:

“We feel the slanders and the criticisms of mankind just as much as the heights of the Himalayas feel the hissing of the serpents that glide around their feet.”

There is *there* no personality which can be hurt by misjudgement, no personality which can suffer by misconstruction. They bestow a blessing, and the man who receives it knows not whence it comes; in his ignorance he jeers or scoffs, or accuses the Masters unknowing what They are, and translating Them into himself as though he were They. Are They hurt? No; to the misconstruction They answer with pity, to the insult They answer with forgiveness, for in Them there is nothing that can be hurt by misconstruction; only They can feel pity for the sake of the one who is blinded and who cannot see — pity for the blinded brother who by his wrong thought is [Page 20] injuring his own Soul. The moon is not injured by anyone who would throw mud against it; the mud falls back on the one who throws it and soils his garments; the light of the moon remains pure and untouched by the mud of earth. And so, as the Soul is thus growing onwards to the light, he uses pain as an instrument to destroy personality, and those subtle things of the personality that the strong Soul may be blind to; he takes the pain as the most merciful of messages to tell him of his own weakness, of his own fault, and of his own mistake. For as you grow in knowledge you realise that your worst enemy is not the outside fault that you recognise, but the inner blindness that does not see the place of danger, and does not know that it does not see. When you fall, and know you fall, then the danger is but a small one; it is when you fall and know not that you have fallen, that the enemies of the Soul rejoice. And if there comes pain from the falling then the pain is welcome; for that tells of the danger and may open our eyes to the slip that has been made. In that way pain, as I said, is no longer an infliction; it is welcome as a warning and as an instrument that the Soul may use; it is now the surgeon's knife that cuts away the spot of danger; no longer to be resisted as an enemy but to be welcomed as a friend.

And still pain has another use, now a matter of choice by the free Soul, the Soul that means to be strong, not for himself but for the helping of the [Page 21] world, the Soul that realises that he has to live for others, and knows that he can only learn to live for others if he is strong in himself; then he will choose pain because only thus can he learn endurance: he will choose pain because only thus can he learn patience. Those who never suffer must always remain weak, and only in the stress and the agony of the combat will the Soul learn to endure, though the combat, remember, is still a sign of weakness. Were we strong we should not need to fight; but we can only gain the strength that shall not need to struggle in the agony of the struggle, for then gradually the strength will work itself into the Soul, and that which once was anxiety and struggle will gain the calm serenity of perfect strength.

And for one other thing the Soul will choose pain — that it may learn sympathy. For even the strong Soul would be useless if he had not learned sympathy. Nay, the strong Soul might be rather dangerous than anything else if he had become strong without compassion, and had learned to gather force while he had not learned to guide that force aright. For force that is only strong and not compassionate may trample instead of raising, and of all things *that* would break, as it were, the heart of the Soul that would fain rise. Strength, not having that touch of sympathy which is keener than all sight and is the very intuition of the Spirit, might be used [Page 22] for mischief and not for helping; he might injure where he desired to help, and might crush where he desired to lift. And so the stronger it is, the more eagerly will the Soul seek this lesson of pain, in order that by feeling he may learn to feel, and that by his own pain he may learn how the pains of the world shall be healed; for otherwise we may not learn. Not from without but from within we have to be built, and all the pains that we have in our imperfections are, as it were, the stones with which the temple of the perfect Spirit is finally built. Pain in the end there will not be; but pain in the building there must be; therefore the Disciple chooses the Path of Woe, because only by woe may he learn compassion, and only as he thrills to every touch from the outer universe will he, who is to be the heart of the universe, be able to send out responsive thrills of healing, which shall pass through all manifested life and carry with them the message of helpfulness and of strength.

Thus then for the uses of pain, though you might find many another. And though I have only taken out a few obvious and simple enough examples, yet they may be helpful in the telling. But is that the end? Is that the final fate of the Soul? Is pain to be anything more than a use? Is pain the natural atmosphere of the Spirit? They err who believe that sorrow is the end of things; they err who believe that pain and sadness are really the atmosphere in which the Spirit lives. The Spirit is bliss, [Page 23] it is not sorrow; the Spirit is joy, it is not pain; the Spirit is peace, it is not struggle; the essence and the heart of all things is love, is joy, is peace; and the path of pain is the path and not the goal, the Path of Woe is only the means and not the end. For out of that Ocean of Blessedness whence the universe has sprung, spring love and peace and joy unceasing, and those are the heritage of the Spirit out of manifestation. Pain lies in the sheaths in which he is clothed, and not in his essential nature.

Never forget that in the struggle of life! Never let the pain blind your eyes to the joy, nor let the passing anxieties bliss which is the core and heart of Being. Pain is passing, bliss is eternal; for bliss is the inner essence of Brahman, the Self of all. Therefore as the Spirit goes onward, therefore as the Spirit grows freer, peace takes the place of struggle, and joy takes the place of pain. Look on the highest face: there is indeed the mark of pain, but of pain that is over and that has been changed into strength and sympathy and compassion, and a deep unending joy. For the final word of the universe is Bliss; the final outcome of Humanity is rest, conscious rest in happiness. And all the messages of pain are in order that the Spirit may gain his liberation; the end is the end of peace, and the manifested side of peace is joy.