

out darkness, how can we hope to understand light? Similarly, evil does not exist, it is merely the absence of good, but without the concept of evil, how can we hope to understand good? Without suffering and pain, we would not be able to understand the value of goodness and pleasure.

## Is Death Really Suffering?

Death is seen as a negative eventuality by most people, but is it really suffering? Ironically, death is the one thing life guarantees since it is certain that one day we will all perish. Also, it seems odd that we have our entire lives to deal with the certainty of death, and yet we find it to be very distressing when someone dies. Finally, for someone that dies, death may be seen as bringing the end to their suffering and so may be seen as a blessing, for example, a terminally ill patient.

## The Perfect Guru's Example

Guru Arjan Dev Ji, the fifth master of the Sikhs, was made to suffer death by torture as ordered by the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. The Guru was made to sit on a red hot plate whilst burning sand was poured over his bare body. Even though the Guru had the power to stop all this suffering, instead he told his people that this suffering was God's will and that he would submit to God's will. Guru Arjan Dev Ji then sang the verse:

*"Your actions seem so sweet to me. Nanak begs for the treasure of the Naam, the Name of the Lord"* (Shri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, p.394).

The ultimate example of the suffering of the Guru should give us the strength to get through times we consider difficult. Also, when we are in a difficult situation we should think 'it could be a lot worse'.

From every experience of suffering there is usually a lesson to learn. This is one of the functions that suffering provides, so do not forget to grow from the experience.

## The Way Out

Sikh dharma offers people a number of ways of dealing with suffering, and these include:

- **Meditation** - Spending some time to meditate on the virtues of God (Naam)
- **Sharing** - Selfless service without reward (Sewa) which may involve serving in the free kitchen (Langar) or doing community work, or even donating a tenth of your time and money (Dasvandh) to needy causes
- **Honesty** - Always speaking and acting truthfully

Good actions may end suffering, but they do not alone give liberation. Liberation is obtained by meditating on the virtues of God (Naam) with love, which connects a person to the Infinity of their True self - their soul.

*"Remembering God in meditation, a profound peace is obtained. Pain and suffering will not touch you at all. Forever and ever, work for God; He is our True Lord and Master. In the Saadh Sangat, the Company of the Holy, you shall become absolutely pure, and the noose of death shall be cut away"* (SGGSJ, p.44).

## Conclusion

- We are responsible for our own suffering due to our desires not being in our control and individual past actions (individual karma)
- Suffering is the mechanism which brings us back to the reality of God
- Evil is just the absence of good and allows us to understand the value of goodness
- Death is not suffering, it is the one thing that life guarantees and is not the end
- Guru Arjan Dev Ji's example should give us the strength to get through suffering
- We should realise that our situation could be a lot worse and to learn from the experience
- Meditation, sharing and honesty are proactive ways to end suffering

# Why So Much Suffering in our World?



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Sikh Dharma

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## Introduction

In day-to-day human experience we are faced with various types of suffering and evil. The concept of suffering causes some people to lose their faith in the existence of God. In other cases, it may cause a person to have more faith in God. One thing is certain however, the reason of why we suffer has puzzled humanity since the dawn of time. Sikh dharma has provided an answer to this apparent paradox, which shall now be discussed.

## Defining Suffering

We are going to first try and define what we mean by suffering, by putting it into following categories:

- Natural - Brought about by natural causes e.g. a disease or natural disaster like an earthquake
- Moral - Brought about through human choice e.g. the Holocaust or a murder
- Relative - Dependant on how we view a situation e.g. death of a freedom fighter may be viewed as bad by his people but to their enemy it may be seen as good
- Absolute - Evil in all situations e.g. Hitler's regime is generally regarded by people in all walks of life as being evil
- Metaphysical - Apparent unfairness of all the suffering e.g. a baby dies of cancer who has seemingly done nothing wrong but at the same time a man who commits many murders lives comfortably

It is important to note that absolute evil does not exist, because what is regarded as absolute evil to one person may not be seen as absolute evil to another, it is therefore dependant on the perception of an individual. Also, it is important to note that any given moral situation may fall into multiple categories.

## Apparent Paradox

The major world religions generally agree in the triad of God, that God is all-loving, all-knowing and all-powerful. However, for those who believe in God, the concept of suffering appears to contradict God's all-loving and all-powerful nature. The questions people pose are, 'How could an all-loving God

allow God's creation to suffer?' and 'Why would an all-powerful God not use his power to intervene and stop the suffering in the world?'

The major world religions have different ways in justifying suffering:

- Christianity, Islam & Judaism - Suffering is due to our sins and there is a Devil who tempts us to commit sin
- Hinduism - Previous and current bad deeds (karma) cause suffering
- Buddhism - Desire and attachment cause suffering
- Atheism - There is no God, so nature and humans are responsible for all suffering
- Sikh dharma - Previous and current bad deeds (karma or kirat) as well as desire and attachment cause suffering

## Individual Karma & Samsara

The theories of Karma and Samsara are an integral part of Sikh dharma. Karma may be defined as the law of every action having a consequence:

*"As someone sows, so he reaps"* (Bhai Gurdaas Vaaran, p.1).

Samsara is the cycle of reincarnation of 8.4 million rebirths and deaths:

*"Those who come, must go in the end; they come and go, regretting and repenting. They will pass through 8.4 millions species; this number does not decrease or rise"* (SGGSJ, p.936).

The rebirths continue until a person achieves liberation (Mukti) from this cycle of transmigration of the soul, which can only be achieved as a human being. This is why human life is regarded as being a very precious and rare opportunity to get out of the system of reincarnation.

## Collective Karma

Sometimes groups of people are killed through either natural or man-made disasters and wars. This is known as collective karma where people are reaping the fruits of their individual actions at the same time individually, but as a collective whole.

## Effects of Actions on Karma

It is due to our previous actions, from our current and previous lives, that we find ourselves in our current situation. People often blame God for all the suffering in their lives, however nobody is responsible for a person's suffering other than themselves:

*"Why do you slander the Lord? You are ignorant and deluded. Pain and pleasure are the result of your own actions"* (SGGSJ, p.695).

## Effects of Desires on Karma

Our mind's desires of lust, anger, greed, worldly attachment and pride keep us from achieving a suffering-free life, because they make our actions reap negative fruits. Once we are in control of these 5 desires then we shall reap the fruits of good actions:

*"In the field of karma, plant the seed of the Naam. Your works shall be brought to fruition"* (SGGSJ, p.176).

## The Need for Suffering

Sikh dharma provides a reason for why an all-loving and all-powerful creator allows suffering to continue. Our entire concept of suffering as being a bad thing, is wrong. Suffering is the mechanism that God has put in place to make us remember and love God again:

*"Suffering is the medicine, and pleasure the disease, because where there is pleasure, there is no desire for God"* (SGGSJ, p.469).

A loving mother sometimes punishes her child, so that the child may reform their bad ways. Similarly, just as iron is beaten by the blacksmith, even though the iron cries out in pain, in the end what is left is iron without the impurities:

*"Putting iron into the furnace the iron is heated. Then it is put on the anvil where it bears the strokes of hammer. Making it clear like glass, its value is set"* (Bhai Gurdaas Vaaran, p.14).

Another way to look at good and evil is to consider instead light and darkness. Darkness does not actually exist, it is merely the absence of light, but with-