

An Essay on Pain

Remembered pain keeps us on guard against its recurrence, and memory exists even in our unconscious mind. Let us remind ourselves that our unconscious mind exists either because we are indifferent to certain things or because we are afraid to re-awaken the memories of unpleasant or painful experiences. Let us remind ourselves that the totality of the records of all our unpleasant and painful experiences are hidden in the depths of our unconscious mind. If we realize the meaning of this, we will be able to understand why Jesus chose to descend into hell to rescue souls there locked up in dreadful suffering and misery.

We do not realize how much we all suffer unconsciously. We know what conscious suffering is, but we tend to believe that if we are not conscious of suffering we are not suffering at all. That notion that we can actually have pains that we know nothing about seems very strange. How can we be in pain and suffer the consequences of it in our body and yet not know that we do so? We can do this because we can block the passage of nerve impulses in our body so that a pain message does not actually reach that part to which it normally would travel.

We know that naturally we do not like pain, and we know that we have some capacity to suppress or ignore it under special conditions. When we are faced with a survival situation in which we need all our energies to stay alive we feel no pain, we are too busy fighting for life. The fact that we can suppress pain in such circumstances proves that we can live without consciousness of it. But this does not prove that the pains we are able to ignore do not exist.

What is pain? Simply, it is refusal of experience. If we are undergoing any experience at all, we are receiving into our organism an energy-input. Energy comes to us from everything we encounter. We call this energy-input a stimulus, because it tends to make us react in some way to it. A speck of dust blowing into our eye tends to result in a blink. This blink is a mode of action intended to defend our eye against damage.

We can class stimuli or energy-inputs according to the amount of energy they contain. If their energy is very small, we might not notice that we have received it. If their energy is not quite so small, we might not notice that input but find it very easy to assimilate, perhaps even pleasurable. If the energy-input is a little heavier, we might find that we have to work a little in order to accept and assimilate it at all. It might actually damage our flesh, destroy some of our cells, and in extreme cases might even kill us. When we find that a stimulus is more than we can comfortably bear, we tend to try and stop its entry into us. We try to refuse it, and this refusal is what we call pain. Unfortunately, by the time we have decided that a stimulus is too painful for us to accept, we have made a record of it in ourselves. Even if we can manage to escape the painful stimulus very quickly, we still have in us the record of that pain, and we do not like it and what we do not like we tend to avoid or push out of our consciousness.

A friend of mine had his right arm blown off during the war. Afterwards he had recurrent pains like those he had experienced when it was first blown off. The

pain he felt seemed to be in his arm, as if he had not lost it. He experienced what is called the phenomenon of the "phantom limb". Although his physical arm had been blown off, he insisted that he could still feel it as if it were still attached to him. The memory of his arm was so strong that he felt it as if it were still with him.

Just as it is possible to experience such a "phantom limb" and repeatedly suffer its original pains, so it is possible to re-experience any event in our lives, just as it was originally experienced. We can re-experience pleasure and we can re-experience pain. Pleasure tends to cause us to relax, pain tends to cause tension. Pleasure allows easy circulation of our energies and our blood. Pain impedes circulation of these. Persistent pain may wear us down, or perhaps prefer death to life.

All the great religions tell us that the result of a truly good life is a state of bliss. "Bliss" is a condition in which our life energies flow freely, without impedence of any kind. The opposite of "bliss" is the experience of total impedence of our Will. Between bliss and total blockage of our will are various degrees of relative impedence. Most of us live a sort of "fifty-fifty" life, a life in which we experience pleasure and pains in about an equal degree. A few persons live a life more pleasant than painful. A few others have more pains than pleasures.

To gain a pleasure-biased life many people pursue activities that cover up what pains they have, so efficiently that they come to believe that their lives are happy. Their pains and displeasures are well hidden. So they are unaware of them. They present such an appearance of happiness that their friends and enemies believe that they really are as happy as they seem. Their friends are happy to see them so happy, and their enemies may be envious of them and even wish to destroy their apparent happiness. Yet all the time, under their facade of happiness may be hidden deep unconscious suffering.

To gain true bliss we have to gain release from all the impedences to our will that are hidden inside us. To do this we have to expose ourselves to all our hidden pains and fears. To do this we have to have the courage to face ourselves as we really are, not as we would like to be. Just as we dislike pains, so we dislike anything whatever that we have difficulty in assimilating. Where we have memories of pains we dislike re-awakening these memories. But where we have unconscious records of pains, we have impedences to the flow of our life-energies.

Now, one of the biggest pains we suffer is that which we feel when we believe that our image of ourself has been damaged. We all tend to prefer a good image of ourself. "Good name in man and woman is the immediate jewel of their souls". If we have a good self-image we believe that we shall find that other persons will like to be with us, to relate to us, to share their lives with us. If we can persuade other people to have a good image of us, we shall be on the way to social acceptability and "success". In practice nearly everyone works hard to present a good self-image to everyone else. Most people know this and tacitly agree to swap good images with each other. Many "success" books offer lessons in how to create good, socially acceptable images, and how to impose them on others. "Politeness" is a key-idea in such books.

"Politeness" means behavior conducive to easy social intercourse. "Oiling the works" makes the engine's parts run efficiently.

Self-image making is used most often to stabilize the mind. We need a good central reference to enable us to balance all our inner processes and to relate them to those of others. Without such good images, social intercourse would be difficult to maintain. We need to be able to rely on each other to some degree. We want "a man's word to be his bond". If it is not we feel insecure and vulnerable.

But although we believe that we need good self-images in order to maintain human society in a working condition, we stand in danger of committing a grave error, the error of making an image of goodness that does not correspond with the fact. If we have a good self-image, yet know that this does not correspond with our real self, we live in fear of exposure. We are afraid that some sharp-eyed person may penetrate our facade. When we see the possibility of this exposure, we tend to tense ourselves. We try to strengthen our defenses. We thicken our walls. We become "thick-skinned".

It is just this "thick-skinned" self-defensiveness that we call egotism. When it exists, we become less and less sensitive to the finer realities of life. We miss the real values and grasp at the most gross. We build thicker walls around ourselves. We reduce the size of our windows so that we see less and less of the realities of the world outside us. "We have eyes but see not". "We have ears and hear not". We allow into us only those things that we believe will strengthen our self-image. We fall far short of the glory that could be ours. We alienate ourselves from our fellows and from God.

It is just this alienation that is meant by "Sin". To sin is to "miss the mark". What we are to aim at is a free, open, joyous interrelation with our fellows and with God. When we "sin" we alienate ourselves from others so cannot enjoy the free, open interrelation that we were destined to have. Where we are not free and open we are bound and closed, and our energies are impeded and unable to experience the bliss that should truly be ours.

To cease to "sin" is to cease to alienate ourselves from others. For this we must get rid of any falseness in our self-image. "Man was made in the image of God" means that man was given the potential whereby he could become like God. To be like God is to be able to think clearly, to feel sensitivity, to will strongly, to co-ordinate these three, and to activate these three accordingly. When a human being is able to do this, and does it, he is said to be "divinised" or made like God. This is the final goal of human evolution.

To cease to "sin", to be released from alienation, is what is meant by "Salvation". The egotised man cannot do this without help. Luckily for all of us the needed help is at hand. It comes to us from God directly and indirectly, directly from His Holy Spirit, and indirectly through the great religious scriptures of the world. These scriptures give the rules of our divinization and direct us to contemplate the Creator of all things as our source and guide. Without these visible scriptures, we might fail to be aware of the Infinite Source-Power in which we

"live, move and have our being", for this Source-Power is invisible to our physical eyes.

When the outer, material world batters on the doors of our sense-organs we tend to be drawn out of our innermost self wherein dwells the Spirit of God. We tend to forget our inwardness, our essentiality, from which springs our free spirit. And in this forgetting we fall into slavery to the external world's stimuli. We become machines, and act like machines. We react to every stimulus of the outer world as if we were utterly devoid of freedom. We lose our essential humanness. At the lowest level of our degenerative form we become as free as stones. We roll down the mountain of time and strike haphazardly against each other as we roll. In our strikings we become convinced materialists. We lose all belief in free will. We think ourselves ruled absolutely by senseless "Laws" of matter, and so make no effort to lift ourselves out of our degenerative condition.

Yet all the while within us is the hidden divinity that confers upon mankind the most marvelous of all gifts, the gift of divine grace, the gift of free will. To exercise this will we have to leave our external mechanical self-image and return into that mysterious centre of our being wherein dwells our God-given free-will. "His worship is perfect freedom". Without this we cannot know real bliss.

To enter the innermost depths of our being, where dwells our freedom, we must penetrate through all the hiddenness of our painful experience records. We must face ourselves as we really are, not as we would like to seem to be, knowing that we are not.

It is a hard and narrow path that we have to tread to penetrate into the hidden mystery of our self-being. To tread this path we must love God, our original source, and fellow path-treaders as our own self. It is a path trodden only by those who love the whole of Reality, and love its parts as of that whole. It is error to love the whole and not its parts. It is equally error to think that we can love parts without loving the whole that generates them.