

The Difference Between Pain and Suffering

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Natalia: Hi, Ted.

I hope you are well! As assimilation continues, the *vasanas* bind less and less as their knots unravel gradually. This results in a kind of non-attachment to most desires.

However, there is one area in which I am struggling with the issue of attachment, and I thought I would ask for your advice. I have a very strong attachment to my daughter (age 12). Like any mother, I want her to be happy, do well and not feel any suffering in *mithya*. Of course I fully realize that she is awareness + *gunas*. She is not “my” child per se. I am simply there to help nurture her as she grows into an adult. And that *Isvara* will deliver her *prarabdha karma* similar to other entities in *mithya*. I get all this completely.

Yet I find there is suffering for my *jiva* due to this attachment. For example, if my daughter is facing what I perceive to be a serious issue, then I find myself tossing and turning at night. Looking from the perspective of the self neutralizes most other suffering almost instantly. But even though I have no doubt that I am the self, when I am upset about something to do with my daughter, I tend to suffer. Even applying *karma yoga* does not alleviate this particular attachment. But as the self, I do see my *jiva* suffering on this particular account, so I’m not unconscious.

I don’t have this level of attachment to my husband or parents or other family/friends (presumably because they are adults).

I have started teaching my daughter a little Vedanta (e.g. *Isvara*, *karma yoga*, *bhakti*, etc.) so that she can be better equipped in her life. She really enjoys it, but being a typical pre-teen she does not apply the teachings as often as she should. So she suffers, and then in turn I seem to suffer!

I’d be grateful for any advice.

As always, thanks so much for all you do.

~ Best, Natalia

Ted: Hi, Natalia.

It is only natural that you feel disturbed when you feel your daughter is facing a serious issue or is suffering. And whether this disturbance is what Vedanta means by “suffering” is a matter worth looking into.

Though self-knowledge does lessen one’s degree of attachment to objects, it doesn’t turn one into a cold-hearted, apathetic, uncaring person. This is a common misunderstanding. People think that they should no longer experience moods or emotions or care deeply about anything because they know that the apparent reality is unreal. But the apparent reality is real, relatively speaking, to the apparent individual. That is to say that the apparent reality shares the same ontological status as the apparent individual and its only real purpose is to provide an arena for

the apparent individual to have experiences. Moreover, the apparent individual is pre-programmed with certain *vasanas* that are the basis of desires and fears, likes and dislikes, attractions and aversions. So the individual will always have preferences that provide the basis for the unavoidable pains and pleasures everyone experiences in life. There is nothing wrong with these preferences other than that, if they are binding, they become the basis of more than pain and pleasure; they cause one to suffer. The virtue of self-knowledge of course is that it affords us the understanding that no matter what happens we are fundamentally okay, that our essential nature as limitless conscious existence is neither enhanced nor diminished by experience. This understanding alleviates the deep existential angst that is what Vedanta means by suffering, which is the result of truly believing that your existential safety and security are in jeopardy if certain conditions are not met. In this way, the assimilation of self-knowledge eliminates suffering, but it doesn't eliminate the pleasures and pains that are an unavoidable consequence of being human.

In regard to this last point, it sounds like you have the understanding that your daughter will be okay no matter what happens to her, and so are not really suffering in the sense that you think she will be fundamentally harmed by whatever happens. So you worry and would like to spare her discomfort, which you know is not possible, and thus you experience pain. But it doesn't seem like it is suffering in the sense that Vedanta defines suffering.

Perhaps I am wrong, however. If you are truly suffering, then the only way to deal with it is to continue to contemplate the teachings and make your best effort to apply them to the suffering that arises. This is the process of *nididhyasana*. Self-ignorance is deeply ingrained, so we have to just keep grappling with it until we finally subdue it.

Please let me know if you have further questions.

~ All the best, Ted