

# Is There a Purpose to Suffering?

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**Seeker:** Dear ShiningWorld, like many others who write to ShiningWorld, I have a long history of studying belief systems, looking for a Way, and being told that I am “too in my mind” and “need to trust intuition more” – instructions that send shudders down my spine, knowing what I do about unconscious biases in reasoning.

Nevertheless, I like to think that those days are over. That was before coming across traditional Vedanta taught by James Swartz. I must admit, I had given up searching for a human teacher, and after reeling from watching yet another “*guru*” fall from grace, found myself thinking about doing an ayahuasca trip to the Peruvian rainforest, possibly to disappear forever in an alternate, steamy world of night-time visions and smiling, nodding heads. I knew I couldn’t solve the riddles of existence myself and that I was, for all intents and purposes, feeling “lost.” Fortunately, that was about the time I came across ShiningWorld. The teachings have had immediate effect, helping to unravel decades of confusion.

I have been studying *The Essence of Enlightenment*, reading *satsangs* and watching James’ videos like a person on fire. Yet this mind remains unsettled by an issue with the nature of suffering, particularly that of wild animals. This issue is not the same as what is commonly called “the problem of evil.”

To use a concrete example, the Australian wombat is a curious creature, a large mammal the size of a small dog, robust, furry and inoffensive. Yet it is prone to dreadful mange, which infests its burrows and infects its progeny. The mites are very hard to control, and once established in their host, cause a slow, agonizing death due to uncontrollable itching. Infected wombats literally scratch themselves to death.

Naturally, I could have chosen many examples found in nature. But for a point of departure for discussion, the plight of the Australian wombat seemed as good as any.

For this *jiva*, seeing an infected animal brings up feelings of injustice and anger in an otherwise fairly calm mind. I understand it is all *Isvara* – the mites, the animal and the suffering. I understand they are “apparently real” and will ultimately dissolve back into consciousness – like waves on an ocean.

I also understand that this apparent reality is much like a dream, and that waking from this dream, as with any dream, lends perspective on all matters. Yet these thoughts do not lessen this *jiva*’s doubts about an intelligent Creator when witnessing the suffering of mite-infested wombats.

I find myself judging *Isvara*, with a (rather self-righteous) sense of outrage! Couldn’t *Isvara* do better? Why would an intelligent Creator allow such intense suffering in this undeserving and helpless creature? Why create apparent sentient objects that spend a good portion of their life suffering?

My questions are these: What purpose does such suffering serve other than to disturb one’s peace of mind? Is this some sort of *vasana* to do with suffering? What

is a more appropriate attitude to hold about such suffering in this apparent reality?

Thank you for your thoughts.

**Sundari:** I am so happy for you that you found Vedanta and particularly James as a teacher. It is like winning the biggest lottery and a testament to your qualifications. You have clearly done “the work” and reached the stage most inquirers do when they are ready to become finders. You are on the bus now, you can relax and trust the scriptures to take you to where you have always been, at home in your self.

The problem with suffering in *mithya* is an issue for many people. It is very difficult to understand if we look at it from an emotional, dualistic and personal perspective. It is particularly troubling when one looks at the suffering of innocents, like children or animals. We must take the dispassionate, big-picture view to make peace with this. The first thing to understand is that *Isvara* is not a person, doling out punishment or reward for any life form. *Isvara* is awareness wielding *Maya*, unaffected by *Maya* – the *gunas*. *Isvara* is *karma phala datta* – the impersonal giver of *karma* for the *jiva*. The *gunas* create the Field of Existence, which is a lawful universe provided for all *jivas* (human or otherwise) to live out their *karma*.

While it is true that many animals seem to suffer, there is no *karma* for animals, because they are entirely ignorant of the self, whereas humans are in the twilight zone with half knowledge (spirit) and half ignorance (matter). *Karma* itself is value-neutral. It is just action and its results. It only becomes meaningful when we evaluate it. We either like it, don't like it or are indifferent to it. Only in the minds of human beings does action become “*karma*.”

The human subtle body has an intellect which reflects consciousness, but although an animal also has a subtle body which reflects consciousness, it does not have a developed intellect capable of self-reflection or “free will.” Animals have no power to analyze or think other than in terms of their desires. Therefore animals do not interpret their environment; they do not evaluate the things that happen to them, in them and around them. Animals are not psychologically impacted by their environment and act purely by “instinct,” meaning according to *Isvara*.

Animals don't need scripture or enlightenment. Being totally ignorant (*tamasic*) of the self, they do not have problems. They are not plagued by guilt, shame or lack of self-esteem. They are not bound by the *gunas*; only humans are bound, as having free will and an intellect capable of doubt we can make choices not conducive to peace of mind, creating “bad” (*papa*) *karma*. But a human subtle body also has the advantage of being capable of analyzing and doing inquiry. Because of this, ignorance can be removed from the mind by self-knowledge, therefore a human subtle body is better than an animal body because it is capable of *moksa*, whereas an animal subtle body is not.

Animal *jivas* (also birds, insects, etc.) belong to the “lower levels” of the apparent reality and have little merit. To achieve *moksa*, a *jiva* must have developed the ability to assimilate the meaning of experience. Animals (and most human *jivas*) are not able to achieve *moksa*, because they cannot assimilate the meaning of experience. If humans develop the requisite qualifications for self-inquiry, it is possible for self-knowledge to obtain. And while animals cannot conduct self-inquiry, they can evolve upwards in certain conditions. Who are we to say then why they suffer? Everything works perfectly in *Isvara*'s creation, all appearances to the

contrary notwithstanding.

To understand the big picture requires an understanding of how the Field manifests and works. When *Maya* appears, *Isvara* in the form of the Creator appears and the Creation apparently manifests. The creation is made up of and originates from the *gunas*: *rajas*, *tamas* and *sattva*. They are impersonal forces that shape the way duality (*samsara*) plays out. This is not a real creation in that it is not always present and always changing, but it exists all the same. Only the self, awareness, is real – always present and unchanging. The *gunas* are what make the creation possible – and – there is no way for this reality to manifest or function if the *gunas* do not have the capacity to play out from one end of the spectrum of good to the other, so-called evil. That is the way it is, no point in breaking our hearts over it. If we want a game called Life this is the only way it can be. If there was only good, the whole show would end.

From the perspective of the *jiva* identified with being a *jiva*, we see this playing out as personal, and have all kinds of thoughts, emotions and actions associated with it. From one's personal to global view, how we see the world and what happens to us – and it will be interpreted by how the mind is conditioned by the *gunas*, i.e. the *vasanas*, which are also generated and coloured by the *gunas*.

Even though I know I am the self and not the person, the apparent person lives in the apparent reality. From the personal perspective, I see the horrific and sad things that happen as heartbreaking and seemingly pointless. But I know that there is nothing to be done about it. "Evil" and suffering will always be present in the apparent reality. It is *rajas* and *tamas* at their worst, manifesting as apparently random or calculated events. They are programs in the causal body that manifest when the conditions for them are right.

It is difficult to accept and soul-destroying if you get drawn into crusading against the dark and sad side of life, but *Isvara's* creation is playing out as it must. *Karma* is impossible to understand from the *jiva's* perspective because the *jiva* can only look at what takes place in the apparent reality from within the framework of the apparent reality. This perspective will always be limited. The apparent reality will always be limited. The only solution is to see it from the point of view of awareness by stepping out of *mithya*.

Suffering, evil, *adharmic* acts and all their many manifestations are abominations and one cannot but denounce them if *dharma* and peace of mind are what you value. But to get involved in value judgments and become emotional about this topic is to forget the most important facts:

1. It is not *Isvara* that causes such horrible things. *Isvara* is not a big person with desires and fears. *Isvara* is limitless awareness, in the role of Creator. Because it is limitless it has every conceivable power, including the power for so-called good and evil – ignorance. If ignorance is excluded from awareness, awareness becomes limited, which when we investigate, we know is not possible. The suffering and evil that one sees are a result of ignorance, not *Isvara*. We know this because individuals who understand their nature as awareness do no evil. And even those who don't, but understand the nature of *Isvara*/the Field of Existence, don't do evil either, because they know that ignorance of *Isvara* is what creates good and evil, *dharma* and *adharma*.

Christ said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." *Maya*

(apparently) makes awareness think it is an individual who does not know that it is actually whole and complete awareness. When awareness is under the spell of *Maya* it seemingly does actions that cause suffering to it and to others. But is this really the case? Nobody asks to have the conditioning they are born with and develop because of their *karma*. *Maya*, beginningless ignorance, is behind it all, from the serial killer to the wombat scratching itself to death, to the lion killing an innocent antelope for dinner. It's all a play of the *gunas*.

2. *Maya* is not real. We know this because it disappears with self-knowledge. If *Maya* is not real, then the effects of *Maya* – good and evil in the apparent reality created by *Maya* – are not real either. Suffering is taking something that is not real to be real. As awareness, you are the witness of (apparent) good and evil, including the suffering animals. So it cannot be either good or evil, because both good and evil are objects known to you, awareness. You are never what you know.

3. Finally, and most important, freedom comes when we can see both *dharma* and *adharma* impersonally, from the dispassionate, non-dual perspective, as the inevitable playing out of the *gunas*, while still being compassionate, empathic and helping where and when we can with the *karma yoga* attitude.

When we can see life this way, we see that there is more good in the world than there is evil and suffering. A good place to start is to stop paying attention to the media, which is intent on maximizing fear and sensationalizing all the bad things that happen. This is a benign universe, taking care of everyone. *Maya* also makes awareness realize its nature as awareness, follow *dharma* and do many wonderful things. Just look at how amazing nature is – how intricate and self-sustaining, when we don't mess with it. Who could design such a perfect creation but an intelligent Creator? But while *Isvara* is intelligent and the creation intelligently designed, this does not mean that the *gunas* do not condition it, positively and negatively, from our limited perspective. This is part of the plan. There are many animals who live out perfectly natural and happy lives where *Isvara* takes care of all their needs. Why focus on the bad? *Isvara* must take care of the mites that live off the wombat too. You have a choice. Choose to see that life is beautiful and perfect the way it is, with *Isvara* taking care of the Total in ways we do not understand as limited *jivas*. Only *Isvara* is omniscient.

When we say the world is perfect as it is we mean that it cannot be anything other than what it is. If the world could be different, assuming *Maya* "thought" that it was not serving awareness, it would make the world a different place. But it never does. So it must be that there is a good reason for suffering. And indeed there is. Although it makes awareness appearing as *jivas* seemingly dull and evil, it also makes them sensitive and awake, which provides them with indirect knowledge of their nature as awareness, thus motivating their quest for direct knowledge.

Some people respond to this knowledge by saying, "If one cannot change anything because it is not real and it is perfect the way it is, why bother trying to help anyone?" But Vedanta says, "Why not help if everything is perfect? Your helping is also perfect. If it is your nature to help or make a contribution to suffering animals or people, you will help. If not, not. If it is your nature to sometimes help and sometimes not, then that is the way *Isvara* created you." Ramana did not crusade against injustice, because he understood that the world is the way it is and it will always be that way. "Do-gooders," as we call them, are not that popular with *Isvara*. This is because this kind of mind usually believes that it knows better and sets out to "save" the world, people or animals. This is not a good motivation for doing anything

to help, because you are assuming you know more than *Isvara* does in delivering *karma*.

Even if these arguments are not convincing to you, what use is suffering because of the suffering you see? It not only does not change the suffering, it adds a bit of suffering to the total. We *jivas* have no control over results. If you want to make a positive contribution by helping in some way, monetarily or otherwise, do so. But it is a thankless task, so let your contribution be an act of service without any thought of changing things or making them better or different. We must always examine our motives for doing anything; see if it is to make yourself feel better, superior or to give you a purpose in life. Often do-gooders have a hidden agenda which is really about them rather than the people or situation they purportedly serve. Many have low self-esteem and “helping” is a way to feel better about themselves. Act to help because it is your nature to do so – or just because you can – with the *karma yoga* spirit and leave the results to *Isvara*. You cannot beat the system. *Karma yoga* is the only way to peace. We all want the world to be a better place, but it is what it is.

~ Much love, Sundari