

Suffering servants

We are all in some ways suffering servants, if not to some external masters, to our own needs and cravings. We suffer most because we must earn a living so that we have an ample supply of food, clothing, a decent place to live in, and good health. The point is that these are not really difficult goals to attain.

Our nature, however, is rarely to feel satisfied when we have attained our goals. When we think we have achieved certain basic goals, we go on to set new and more difficult ones. These new benchmarks are not so much our real needs, as they are often the result of our envying what we see as success in others.

The point is that deep inside, we are not really happy nor satisfied individuals. Our dissatisfaction arises when we look around and take others as our standards. Do we really know the minds of these people we admire? Externally, people may look happy and successful, but very rarely are they truly happy inside.

A rule of thumb is that the more superficial or showy a person is, the less likely he is to be happy inwardly. They might even show themselves to be "supersweet." Notice how they can be really nice to everybody, but are really nice to no one (not even to themselves). Such people do not really have any friends, no true friends, anyway.

Or, we could be looking for an ideal partner, a soul-mate. We keep looking for someone who would truly love us, or at least agree with the way we think. We could resort to a mate-matching electronic device where we key in a list of our likes. When we are in some busy shopping complex or some crowd, two such devices might go off at the same time, and voila it could be that ideal soul-mate.

This may be a great way to meet people, but the wise remind us: "Friends are not found; they are made." Mutually buzzing might be a great way to find friends, but this is only a beginning. We need to spend time enough together to really get to know one another and to harmonize ourselves. We need to get used to one another walking in each others' shoes, as it were, until they snugly fit.

What about pain, both physical and mental: we are often their servants, if not slaves, too. We are all sick in some way, if not with a physical pain, we sicken with some imagined hurt or painful memory. Pain and sorrow are very powerful masters if we do not understand them.

Why do we suffer mental pains? The simple answer (usually works) is that we are simply reacting to our past conditionings and memories. Many such triggers are deeply rooted in our minds that we are not even aware of them: they are repressed. We begin to know them by noticing defensive patterns of reactive behaviour towards others.

For example, we simply show anger when someone says something or does something: we are using aggression to fend off perceived intrusion into our comfort zone. Or, we are really drowned in our work, or accumulating money, hoping to achieve some goal in life so that we miss living the moment. We are compensating what we see as a failure in us.

Or, we regularly get violent towards our loved ones when some people higher up is hurting us: we are displacing our anger or frustration. There are many other such defence mechanisms. We begin to deal with them by being unconditionally conscious of them. ("I accept myself just as I am," and work from there.)

Many of us have recurring mental difficulties. We are often ridden with lust, or hate, or fear. Here we begin by asking the basic question: What am I lusting after (a face, the hair, the chest, the arms, the legs?). We cannot love only a part of a person (it's a kind of emot-

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ional cannibalism). We need to love the whole person. Before loving someone, we must know him well enough. Lust tries to grasp another until he takes the shape of our hands. Love, on the hand, is an art that has to be cultivated and worked.

Love is best when we truly show it. The other party, of course, has the right to turn us down. When things do not work out, we should part as friends. It is not that we have "failed" to find a soul-mate, but we are getting better at it and nearer to finding the right one. As this is a matter of the heart, we must have a feel for it.

Love must pervade our hearts, words and deeds, regarding the other as we would regard ourselves. Even when we are married or partnered, we need to see our partners daily as if we are meeting for the first time. Never stop being surprised by the one you love. When things get a bit rough, try recalling the first day when you both met, or some really happy moments together. Lovingkindness meditation is the heart that ever holds a marriage for life.

There are always those we hate or those who hate us. If we understand why hate arises in people, we would have got rid of hate altogether. This wisdom is possible, but not easy to master. The point is that we are all somehow reacting to some past pain, and we tend to vent it on the most convenient subjects, usually those near and dear to us. As closet bullies, we think that they would not desert us, but people can change, especially in face of hurt and threat. As such, we should never take our loved ones for granted.

Face that hate, define it (do not make more than what it really is), discuss it with someone close if possible (to see it more objectively). Hate fears love. Love is the art of seeing beauty within ourselves and radiating it outwards, especially where we see darkness.

Love even your enemies, but how? First, we need to accept that an enemy is not a person, but a state of mind. If in our hearts, we tell our enemy, "Be well and happy!" that "enemy" has no more power over us.

What about hearing voices? We all hear voices, even right now as you read this. Most of us, however, know these are our own inner thoughts. Sometimes these voices seem to replay in a loop, so that we keep hearing the same things again and again. Or we hear things we do not like. Then we should make conscious efforts to play a new tune, so to speak.

One helpful way to do this is to gently and happily (with an inner smile) recall very happy moments in our life, especially our childhood. When we feel calm or joyful enough, then we remind ourselves, "I'm happy! I'm OK!" The voices may return, but then we will find it easier to say, "These voices are mind-made. They are only thoughts. I'm letting go of you, voices. You are free, thoughts!" Smile at them, then breathe gently, counting as we breathe in and out, "1," in-out "2" and so on up to "10."

We have six wonderful servants – Eye, Ear, Nose, Tongue, Body, and Mind – who serve to bring us happiness and wisdom, that is, if we respect them for what they are, if we know when to let them take their leave. So what set the master apart from the servant? If we do not know when to stop in our excesses, then we are servants. If we know when to stop, to let go, just be (yes, let it be), then, we are masters.

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