

## Reason or season

Does everything happen for a reason?

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When something really good or really bad happens, whether to us or to others, or it just happens, we often quip: "There's a reason for everything." This seems to be a common way of coping with something bad that happens to us. It seems to help us deal with personal failure, relationship issues, financial crises, losses, disease, deaths, social unrest, even natural disasters.

Or, when something good happens to others which we want to happen to us. Or, something so devastating that we are unable to make any sense of it. "It happens for a reason!" is a safe bet, so we think.

We are simply unwilling or unable to imagine that bad things happen merely through chance or accident. The point is they do, but not in the way it seems.

### Everything a lesson

It is not that everything happens for a reason. They don't! Rather that:

Everything is teaching us something.

Here are 5 things to remember and practise.

#### [1] It helps us shatter wrong beliefs

This verbal reflex that everything happens for a reason is the modern version of the old pious excuse: "It's God's will." Both sayings have the same problem: there is no evidence at all that either is true, or even helpful if true. Moreover, this excuse simply prevents us from looking deeper and more broadly into why things really happen, that they happen so. They are called phenomena.

Firstly, there is no real evidence that God exists. Secondly, we have no way of knowing what it is that He or She wants to happen. We only know that it actually did happen. On All Saints Day, 1755, did God's will the Church roofs to crush the packed pious congregations in prayer below, and to destroy almost all of Lisbon and thousands of its people in history's worst earthquake (with fire and tsunami; 8.5-9.0 on the moment magnitude scale)?

One good thing was that this disaster thwarted Portugal's colonizing ambitions. (The Portuguese conquered Melaka in 1511 and ended its Sultanate, remember?)

#### Only conditions

Then, there was the 2010 earthquake that devastated one of the world's poorest nations, Haiti (which was mainly Catholic, too). Is this God's will?

Amongst the world's poorest countries in Africa, millions are deprived of food, water, shelter, hygiene and health: God's will?

Or, do such events suggest an extreme malevolence in the universe and its imagined Creator? There are no reasons for such disasters; no Creator—just conditions. This should shatter all our beliefs in some kind of almighty agency. This, in fact, happened in Europe after the 1755 Lisbon earthquake: many people doubted, even rejected, the God-idea.

## [2] It helps us understand ourself better

On the other hand, there is good evidence that such events can (and should) be seen as the result of accidents, even of chance. The idea that chance is an objective property of the universe was advocated in the 19th century by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who called it **tychism** (from the Greek word for chance). It is supported by quantum theory of 20th-century science, which explains that some events such as radioactive decay are by nature unpredictable.

In nature, things happen by chance: we usually cannot explain why things happen, like why there are so many kinds of birds, or how we came to be humans. Since we explain the why of things, we often take the easy way out by imagining that some powerful **being**, a God, did all this. But this idea itself, has so many faults. In fact, anyone can use this dangerous idea as a mean of gaining **power** from our ignorance. Hence, the God-idea has started wars and exploitation of others. Most wars and violence, even today, are rooted in religion and God-belief.

## Reasoning is human

Our notion that there is a reason for whatever happens simply shows that we are able to reason things. Reasoning is not a characteristic of nature: it is a human characteristic. It is our reasoning that is able to see that

- (1) these events are disastrous. When we accept this, we should next ask:
- (2) what caused it. Having reasoned thus, we are better prepared to
- (3) know how to remove the cause or causes, and
- (4) to work together, even alone if necessary, to correct the situation.

In this way, we understand ourself better than passively saying “everything must have a reason,” and to do nothing about it.

## [3] It make us more resilient

Even if events affecting us do not happen by quantum chance, many of them should be seen as occurring by **accident**. Various chains of causes and effects meet to make things happen. The destructions and deaths in Lisbon, for example, happened because on account of many causal chains, basically because

- (1) the historical developments that brought thousands of people to live in Lisbon, and

(2) the earthquakes and tsunamis arising from the meeting of opposing tectonic plates in the earth.

These deaths were accidental since the crashing between of these earth-plates was unpredictable. History and earth movements may not be random, but their meeting of conditions and their effects are accidental in that they are so unpredictable.

### **Philosophy**

Philosophers, too, thought about the views that “everything happens for a reason.” The German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1831) thought that in history the real is rational and the rational is real.

Similar ideas are found in economics. Before the recent meltdowns in global finance, economic theory dictated that individuals and markets are inherently rational. Even some evolutionary scientists and psychologists held that all common traits and behaviours must have evolved from “natural selection,” where the fittest survive and procreate.

### **Resilience**

Taken Japan, for example, a country is often struck by natural disasters, especially earthquakes, typhoons, torrential rains and tsunami (which is a Japanese word). In Japanese history, sometimes these were accompanied by famine, social unrest, and threats of foreign invasions. Recently, they faced a nuclear disaster at Fukushima.

They faced all such disasters stoically, as a community of great resilience. This is one of the Japanese characteristics that make them a great nation.

### **[4] We become more empathetic and authentic**

Hence, when we carefully examine history, economics, biology, and psychology, we will find evidence for understanding that many events arise from a network of chance, accidents, and human irrationality. For example, the economist John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946) attributed financial crises partly to “animal spirits,” that is the emotional processes that can make people swing unpredictably between irrational exuberance and pessimistic despair.

Even without resorting to the delusions of religion or modern superstition, we can still cope with life’s disasters. Our minds somehow present us with the psychological mean for coping with the life’s uncertainties. Psychologically, we come up with explanations and solutions when faced with disasters. We work out, alone or as a network, emotional strategies to manage the anger, fear and anxiety that characterize the challenges that befall us.

### **[5] We are not perfect but we progress**

In fact, for Buddhists, suffering gives meaning to life; indeed, it is the meaning of life: the 1st noble truth. This means it does not arise by chance or accident, but has a cause or causes: this is the 2nd noble truth. The purpose of life, then, is to end or correct the causes of

suffering, and we should positively act on this course of actions (the path). These are, respectively, the 3rd and the 4th noble truths.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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