

The purpose of pain

Introduction

Pain has always existed but many observers - Muslim and non-Muslim - are convinced that pain, anguish and sufferings have increased in the last decade like never before. Global tensions, racism, depression, mental illness and the Pandemic have all unfortunately fuelled this suspicion.

No one likes pain. But the irony is that the fear of being inflicted with pain has led to *more* pain, in the form of anxiety. During the Pandemic, many people did not suffer from Covid-19. But the mere *fear* of being inflicted with it meant countless people still suffered immensely.

Islam - as the perfect religion for all times - gives us wonderful guidance on pain to (i) make it more bearable (ii) to understand the purpose behind pain and anguish. Here are four simple points that our perfect religion teaches us:

Point one - pain is inevitable

A painless life is not possible. Even the closest men to Allāh - the prophets and messengers - had to endure it, and in fact, they suffered more than anyone else. Then above all, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) suffered the most. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) never saw his blessed father. His blessed mother died at six (may Allāh be pleased with them both). Mental abuse, physical violence, social boycott and verbal torments; he (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) endured it all at the hands of the Makkans. In fact, one year of his blessed life was called 'the year of sorrow' (*Ām al-Huzn*).

Yet despite this all, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) smiled all the time. In fact, no one ever smiled *more* than the Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him):

عن عبد الله ابن الحارث بن جزء قال ما رايت احدا اكثر تبسما من رسول الله صلى الله عليه و سلم

Abd Allāh ibn al-Harith said: ‘I did not ever see anyone who smiled more than the Messenger of Allāh (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him).’

Point two - no pain is in vain

Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) explained in one beautiful hadīth the different types of pain a person may suffer. With all of them, he mentioned that when a person suffers from any of them, then his minor sins are forgiven as a result:

عن أبي هريرة رضي الله عنه عن النبي ﷺ قال ما يصيب المسلم من نصب و لا وصب و لا هم و لا حزن و لا اذى و لا غم حتي الشوكة يُشاكها الا كفر الله بها من خطاياها

Abū Hurayrah (may Allāh be pleased with him) reports from the Prophet (peace & blessings of Allāh be upon him) who said: ‘No Muslim suffers from *nasab*, *wasab*, *hamm*, *hazan*, *aza*, *ghamm*, even a thorn he is pricked with, except Allāh wipes out some of his [minor] sins.’

There are different types of pain and anguishes that inflict the body; some external, some internal. Most of them have been mentioned in this one hadīth sharīf:

Nasab (نصب) : This means fatigue, both physical and mental.

Wasab (وصب): This means illness, normally a more permanent form of illness.

Hamm (هم): This means inner illnesses. It is said it is related to forthcoming worries, the worries that one has regarding them.

Hazan (حزن): It is read *Hazan* and *Huzn*. This is also an inner illness. This relates to past worries and issues; perhaps a person has lost something he had in the past and now this causes him discomfort.

Aza (اذي): Any pain in general. It is also said that this is pain inflicted from an external source.

Ghamm (غم): It is being sad and depressed due to unknown reasons. In other words, you are sad, but you cannot work out exactly why. This differs from *khawf* in the sense this is sadness and depression due to *known* reasons. You know where the fear is coming from; it is a fear of heights, or spiders or stairs.

With all of them, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) explained that when a Muslim suffers from any of these, then his minor sins are forgiven. The pain can be small, but Allāh still forgives. The same hadīth states that if a person is pricked from a thorn - a pain which lasts seconds - then this pain too leads to the forgiveness of some sins.

The hadīth is glad-tidings for us all. No one is ever pain-free, internal or external, short term or long term. So the hadīth is saying we are always shedding sins.

Point three - pain has a purpose

Pain is often the body's way of telling us something is wrong with the body. If the stomach hurts, then perhaps this is the body's way of telling us there is something wrong with our digestive system. If we suffer headaches, then it means we perhaps are not drinking enough water. If we suffer from back pains, then it perhaps means we sit for too long in one position or our posture is wrong.

In our sophisticated cars today, we have an array of warning lights on our dashboard to tell us if there are things wrong with the car, like less oil or engine management problems. Pain in the body is our dashboard warning sign. In that sense, pain is necessary. How will you know there are things wrong in your car if there are no dashboard warning lights? In the same way, how will we know there is something wrong with our body if we do not feel pain? Likewise, our bodies suffer from insomnia, depression, sadness and so on. This too is a warning sign from our body, in particular, the heart. Because we live in a 'scapegoat culture' we interpret our pains and anxieties as caused by external factors. Seldom do we see them as the warning sign of our heart speaking to us.

Point four - pain makes us more appreciative

Pain exists to recalibrate our happiness levels. After fully recovering from an immense headache, a person breathes a huge sigh of relief and feels happy. In reality all that has happened is that he has returned to the state he was in *before* the headache appeared. But the headache itself has led him to appreciate that state of peace much more. Seen in this light, pain is necessary to make us stay thankful and appreciative.

Conclusion

*Learn from the best examples, the chosen men of Allāh:

وأيوب اذ نادى ربه أني مسني الضر و أنت أرحم الراحمين

And remember Ayyūb, when he called his Lord: ‘Distress has undoubtedly inflicted me, and You are the most Merciful of the merciful ones! (21: 83).

When Prophet Ayyūb (peace be upon him) experienced pain, he did two things (i) he called Allāh, which shows communication. Too many people today suffer from immense pain, but do not talk to their Lord or to their loved ones about it (ii) he invoked His mercy. The latter means that he did not succumb to pessimism and loss of hope. Never despair from Allāh, no matter how bad the pain is.

*When someone beats a rug with a stick, then seemingly he is doing no favours to it. In reality, he is doing something very important. He is removing all the dust from it, and he is purifying it. Pain may be hard to endure, but it is a purifying process for our inner and outer. It is an indispensable part of our lives.

*Perhaps in this day and age, we need to redefine what ‘pleasure’ is. For too long, we have associated this word with thrills, the release of certain hormones, a ‘good time’ and so on. Maybe we should simply define pleasure as ‘the absence of pain’. If a person is not experiencing any pain - physically and emotionally - then what greater pleasure is there than that?

*Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) provided us with *duā*’s we can recite to cure our pains. For physical pains, he asked us to place our hands on the affected area and then (i) Recite *Bismillāh* three times (ii) and then the following seven times

أَعُوذُ بِعِزَّةِ اللَّهِ وَقُدْرَتِهِ مِنْ شَرِّ مَا أَجِدُ وَأُحَاذِرُ

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