

WHY ME?

There are a number of basic questions that are fairly common to the human experience. But there's one question that just about everyone asks at one time or another: Why me?

You can feel the poignancy in that question, can't you? Why *ME*????? It has all the longing, frustration and puzzlement you could ever experience wrapped up in two small words: Why me? Kris Kristofferson wrote a song called, "Why Me?" Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley and George Jones all recorded it and re-titled it, "Why Me, Lord?" Most of us have said it, most of us have heard it said, and whenever we hear it we say to ourselves, "Yes, I can relate!" It's "misery loves company" all in one neat little package.

Buddhism tells us that there are layers upon layers, reasons upon reasons for the things we say, do and think. Everything that emanates from our being is the result of a multi-tiered, terrifically complex series of causes and conditions. From a Buddhist perspective a human being is a very complex individual not just because of the complexities that are inherent to this life, but also because of the complexities that have been brought forward from previous existences.

One translation of "Why Me?" takes the form of "Why does this have to happen to me?" This is a cry of suffering, a cry of pain, a cry of indignation and outrage. The interesting thing is that we never seem to ask this question when things are going well for us, although that's not unheard of, as we'll discover later.

Just as we've conditioned ourselves to create suffering, we've also conditioned ourselves to experience suffering and to expect suffering. In one of the Star Trek movies, Captain Kirk declares, "I don't want my pain taken away...I need my pain!" He says that pain makes us what we are, and that if we lose our pain we lose ourselves. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't mind losing that self! So on one hand we ask "Why Me?" while underneath the surface we sort of expect things like this to happen. This sort of personal double standard is definitely not healthy! It creates confusion, doubt and hesitation because it makes us question, in an unhealthy way, almost everything we do.

Let's look at the nature of suffering. There is no doubt we suffer in this life. The first teaching the Buddha ever uttered to another person stated this obvious fact. Our suffering takes various

forms and is experienced in various degrees. Buddhism says that there are eight separate categories of suffering:

1. **Birth.**
2. **Aging.**
3. **Illness.**
4. **Death.**
5. **Being Separated From Loved Ones.**
6. **Meeting With Those We Dislike.**
7. **Not Being Able to Obtain What We Desire.**
8. **Suffering Caused by the Sense of a Discrete Personality.** Fast-moving mental impulses give us a sense of a discrete personality. We have a passionate desire to experience sensory pleasure and we suffer because of the inability to fulfill such desires thoroughly.

All of these sufferings speak to the inherent impermanence of life, and it's our inability to come to terms with this fact that causes us to suffer when unfortunate things come into our lives. But it doesn't have to be that way. The Thai Buddhist monk Ajahn Chah addressed this when he said, "You needn't worry about anything because this isn't your real home, it's just a temporary shelter. Having come into this world you should contemplate its nature. Everything there is, is preparing to disappear. Look at your body. Is there anything there that's still in its original form? Is your skin as it used to be? Is your hair? It's not the same, is it? Where has everything gone? This is nature, the way things are. When their time is up, conditions go their way."

To ask ourselves, "Why does this have to happen to me?" ignores a basic fact of life, but to just resign ourselves to that suffering is the worst kind of pessimism since we have the ability to change things. The basic Buddhist answer to "Why Me?" is that each of us has set up the conditions for our suffering in this life and in previous existences. This is the teaching of karma, cause-and-effect. And even though it is possible for us to counteract this suffering and to even transcend this suffering entirely, suffering still visits us in one form or another. The thing we can take solace in is the fact that any misfortune that befalls us is the end of a cycle of cause and effect, so if we develop an even-handed view of our misfortunes, our own answer to the question "Why Me?" will be, "Because I set it up!"

And of course the question "Why does this have to happen to me?" has some associated questions; questions like, "Why couldn't this have happened to someone else?" and "How can

I get out of this mess?” This is what we call aversion, a desire to avoid the situation, not to face it directly but to either get away or to transfer the suffering that is our own responsibility to someone else. In truth, aversion is just another form of attachment. Where attachment says “I want that,” aversion says “I don’t want that.” In either case, there’s what we call an ego-consciousness that mistakenly believes that it is somehow separated from either the things it desires or that which it wants to avoid, and it actively works toward that end. “How can I get out of this mess?” also speaks to the fact that we sometimes don’t have confidence in ourselves and in our ability to effectively deal with life situations.

Another question that’s beneath the surface of “Why Me?” is “Why am I at such a loss to explain this?” This is an expression of ignorance and confusion. We don’t know exactly why something is happening to us, or perhaps we just choose to ignore why it’s happening to us. In this case, ignorance isn’t bliss at all but is, rather, a statement of fear.

This fear is at the root of a couple of other questions, namely, “What’s next?” and “Hasn’t enough happened to me already?” Our constant self-conditioning sometimes makes us think that if one bad thing happens, another is sure to come right on its heels, and so we’re often looking over our shoulder for the “next bad thing.” We also try to delude ourselves into thinking that there’s some kind of a quota for our suffering, that there’s some kind of cosmic limit on how much suffering we should have to endure, when the universe tells us otherwise.

So the question “Why Me?” is just the surface expression of a host of other questions that are circulating in both our conscious and subconscious minds and which cause an underlying sense of confusion to be present.

The emotion most commonly associated with suffering is sadness. It’s natural to feel sadness in connection with suffering, but because of our self-conditioning, our reactions to unfortunate events can become more severe with each instance. This can lead us to become very sensitive and irritable whenever anything happens that’s not to our benefit. It can even lead to a very strange reaction when we experience a particularly fortunate circumstance, namely, the sense of unworthiness. When something happens that benefits us, we may say to ourselves, “I don’t deserve this! I’m not worthy!” In western culture we say that such a person “just can’t handle prosperity.” So by conditioning ourselves this way, we can turn a positive event into a distinctly negative event.

Another emotional manifestation underlying “Why Me?” is a sense of loneliness and isolation. Because we have a very well-developed sense of a discretely-existing self we are much more likely to fall prey to an underlying feeling that we’re out there on an island. So when misfortune strikes we hug this suffering to ourselves, we take ownership of it. “This suffering is mine!” Remember what Captain Kirk said?

Related to this egocentric view is the sense that we have lost our perceived sense of personal dignity somehow. “I don’t deserve this! It isn’t fair!” Then we become very defensive.

Another emotional state is one of imbalance, of having one’s view of things turned upside-down by an unexpected happening or happenings. We have a lot of expectations regarding how life should be; this “grasping at views,” is a form of ego-based attachment. When we become unbalanced by the events we experience, we flail about in an attempt to right ourselves, and sometimes we lash out at others with no consideration for their feelings or their unique situation.

This state of unbalance is supported by a sense of undermined permanence. Our ego-supported view of a permanent, unchanging self and world is shaken by events, particularly unfortunate events, so “Why Me?” becomes a cry of extreme surprise and shock. We are grieving for the loss of our perceived permanent self; we may even go far out of our way to defend the so-called self that we think we’re “losing.”

Yet another underlying emotional state is feeling trapped by circumstances. Now, “Why Me?” is a desperate appeal for rescue. Within this emotional state is contained a sense of numbing repetitiveness. We say, “Oh no, not again!” If once is enough, more than once is too much!

Buddhism teaches that there are three poisons which cause us to suffer, namely craving, hatred and ignorance. When these three poisons act as triggers for the karmic effects that we experience, we refer to them as “afflictions. These three poisons are woven throughout the question, “Why Me?”

In order to deal with these sorts of things, we need to understand and accept the workings of cause and effect, of karma. The thing to remember is that even though it is the mechanism through which things happen to us, karma is not fixed or permanent. We need to remember that even though we may be working to purify all our karma, things will still happen to us for

good or ill. So, painful as it may be at times, we need to keep telling ourselves that all things happen for reasons, and that whatever happens, we will simply deal with them as best as we can.

Next, we need to be comfortable with impermanence. When the Buddha died, Ananda, the Buddha's cousin who was one of his disciples wept openly. The Venerable Anuruddha spoke to Ananda saying, "Has not the Buddha told us, Ananda, that what is born, what comes to being, and what is put together is subject to dissolution? That is the nature of all conditioned formations, to arise and pass away. Having once arisen they must pass away. And when such formations cease completely, then comes the Peace Supreme." In other words, being comfortable with impermanence will ease our lives in many ways.

Another way to help put "Why Me?" out of business is to let go of the sense of the discrete self. Through meditative concentration we see that the so-called discretely abiding self is nothing more than an illusion created by the cravings of the mind. Practicing non-attachment helps us by breaking the habit of seeing all things in terms of self-and-other. This also serves to calm the mind, while at the same time giving us that sense of supreme confidence we call "fearlessness." In the Heart Sutra there is a line that says, "No hindrance in the mind, no hindrance, therefore no fear." If the true mind is allowed to manifest itself completely, without hindrance or interruption, fear cannot arise.

We may also have faith and trust in our mind itself, our True Mind which is unaffected by events and phenomena. In the sixth century CE, the famous teacher Seng-T'san, wrote a beautiful poem called, "Having Trust in the Mind." One of the verses goes like this:

*In the ultimate realm, the farthest extreme, norms and standards no longer hold.
Once achieve true impartiality of mind and purposeful actions will cease completely.
All fret, all doubt cleansed in the harmony and directness of true faith.
Nothing whatsoever remains, nothing to be thought of or recall.
In empty brightness your light shines of itself without labor to mind or body,
There in the place past reckoning, beyond the ken of cognition or feeling.*

Seng-T'san was saying that the essential mind is bright and clear and penetrating, so by trusting it completely, nothing can bother us.

Another way to get past “Why Me?” syndrome is to develop what the ancient Taoists called “Wu-Wei,” or allowing things to be as they are while at the same time flowing with that state of being. We may also call it, “adaptability.” Ray Grigg wrote a book called, “The Tao of Zen” which dealt with the influence of Taoism on Zen Buddhism. In it he said:

The wisdom, the peace, the grace of Taoism and Zen comes from a special uncertainty. The result is a condition of perpetual preparedness, an easy readiness that takes an appropriate shape for every particular circumstance. Every answer becomes, “As the situation arises.” Each individual person becomes the balanced and shapeless center of the universe, dancing alone with the unpredictable order that swirls everywhere.

That “special uncertainty” is a willingness to allow and accept things to happen as they will and to deal with them as they come with no thoughts of regret or remorse, just the experience of the continuity of being itself.

I’d like to conclude by once again quoting the Venerable Ajahn Chah:

Even if your house is flooded or burnt to the ground, whatever the danger that threatens it, let it concern only the house. If there’s a flood, don’t let it flood your mind. If there’s a fire, don’t let it burn your heart, let it be merely the house, that which is external to you, that is flooded and burned. Allow the mind to let go of its attachments. The time is ripe.

In truth there’s no self anywhere to be found, there are only phenomena continually arising and passing away, as is their nature. Every single moment we’re undergoing birth and death. This is the way things are.

And so, if we can develop the emotional maturity, the equanimity of mind and the wisdom to answer “Why Me?” with “Why not?” we will have taken some very large steps toward dealing with life in a most auspicious fashion.

EXTRA QUOTES

In the Dhammapada, a collection of sayings of the Buddha, is written:

The mindful exert themselves. To no abode are they attached. Like swans that quit their pools, home after home they abandon and go on.

Seng-T'san's poem on Having Faith in the mind also contains this verse:

*Leave it! Let things take their course! In the end there's neither going nor staying.
Follow your nature, blend with the Way, be free and easy, a stranger to all care.*